

YINKA SHONIBARE MBE



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Edited by Rachel Kent

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Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE

Rachel Kent

Every human problem must be considered from the standpoint of time. Ideally, the present will always contribute to the building of the future.

—Frantz Fanon¹

Yinka Shonibare MBE is a British-born Nigerian artist who works across the media of painting, sculpture, photography, and filmmaking. He is a master of technical and visual versatility, well known for his embrace of richly patterned Dutch wax textiles, which are applied to the surface of canvases and three-dimensional landscapes, fashioned into elaborate period costumes upon headless mannequins, and used to clothe performers in sweeping cinematic tableaux. Underpinning the artist's work is an engagement with themes of time: of history and its legacy for future generations, of how we live in the present, and of cycles or patterns that repeat across time despite their often destructive consequences. In this way he pricks the consciences of those who encounter his art, using beauty and seduction instead of words as his chosen weapons.

Much has been written about Shonibare's strategic use of Dutch wax fabric, its history, and its symbolism. Though it is commonly described as "African-print" fabric, its complex origins and production encompass the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. Inspired by Indonesian batiks, manufactured in the Netherlands and Manchester, and marketed in the nineteenth century to West African buyers, Dutch wax

fabrics have become a signifier of authentic African identity, particularly in the wake of 1960s decolonization and the rise of Pan-African nationalism. This might seem ironic in light of their European colonial origins, yet it is precisely this sense of ambiguity and hybridity that has drawn Shonibare to their colorful, stylized images of Western consumer goods, African political leaders, and abstract geometric patterning. Speaking of their tangled transcontinental history, he says, "What that means to me is a metaphor . . . of interdependence."² Origins and authenticity, high art and popular culture are recurring themes in Shonibare's art, brought into focus through the symbolism of Dutch wax fabric and its deployment across two- and three-dimensional forms. Shonibare, who purchases his fabrics at London's Brixton Market, adds, "When you realise they are designed and produced by people in Dutch and English factories, then that completely destroys the methodology of this seductive African thing. Therefore it is important I don't go to Africa to buy them, so that all African exotic implications remain fake. And I actually like that fakeness."³

The story of Shonibare's first experimentation with Dutch wax fabric in the mid-1990s is an oft-recounted one and serves to set the ground for much discussion of his subsequent practice. Born in the United Kingdom to Nigerian parents, who returned to Lagos with Shonibare and his siblings when he was three, Shonibare relocated to London at the age of seventeen and later undertook tertiary studies in art. While at art school he was questioned by a lecturer about his choice of subject matter and why it was not "African" in theme. Surprised and then intrigued by the perception that, as a person of African origin, he should therefore be expected to make "African" art, he began to think about stereotypes as well as wider issues

Last Supper (after Leonardo) (detail), 2013. Thirteen life-size mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton, reproduction wood table and chairs, silver cutlery and vases, antique and reproduction glassware and tableware, fiberglass and resin food; 158 x 742 x 260 cm. VandenBroek Foundation, Sassenheim

of authenticity and its flip side—selecting his fabrics to illustrate the muddiness that underlies such preconceptions. What would it mean to make an African-style art, and is there really such a thing in this day and age? For a middle-class Nigerian Londoner with deep roots in both countries, these questions opened up a host of possibilities as well as complexities. He says, “As an artist of African origin . . . there is an expectation that I am still connected to traditional African art, even though I am a twenty-first-century person and it would be rather odd to imagine that a French or English artist is remotely interested in medieval art.”⁴ *Contamination* is a word that Shonibare has used in describing his methodological approach, noting that “this purity notion is nonsense.”⁵ Working across cultures and seamlessly integrating the language of contemporary art with that of popular culture, fashion, literature, and cinema, he suggests a range of gray areas rather than simple “categories” for the framing of ideas.

Shonibare’s early paintings illustrate these concerns well. Comprising neat rows of small, square canvases wrapped in Dutch wax fabric instead of linen, they are overlaid with pigment and then arranged en masse upon a monochromatic background square (see pp. 201–3). They draw upon Minimalism’s use of seriality, repetition, and the grid while breaking down the grandiosity of scale and gesture associated with its (predominantly white male) practitioners. Subsequent paintings by Shonibare have consisted of small roundels upon circular or oval painted backgrounds (p. 200), and two paintings of 2006 (see pp. 196–97) have broken down the notion of the border or edge altogether with their glistening black splatter-forms across the gallery wall. Referencing “black gold,” or Africa’s rich oil resources, they also recall the extravagant splashes and drips of the American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, to which they form a riposte. Discussing “fragmentation” as an element of impurity, Shonibare observes, “There is no need for me to make one big heroic painting. I can actually take the language of this big abstract painting and produce it in very small pieces, in fragments. I can actually break it down and reconstruct it.”⁶ For an artist with a physical disability, the reduction of scale is equally a practical solution. Additional parallels have been drawn between the artist’s use of the grid and the geometric patterning and warp and weft of traditional West African textiles,⁷ whereas Robert Hobbs has eloquently addressed the profound significance of Nigerian Yoruba culture for Shonibare in his essay in this publication.



Fig. 1. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Circular Fetish Painting with Nails 2*, 2012. Acrylic and acrylic aerosol spray paint on Dutch wax printed cotton, steel and aluminum nails, Medite MDF; 118 x 118 x 10 cm

Indeed, some of Shonibare’s most recent paintings have moved off the gallery wall and onto the floor, taking the form of leaning panels or “totems,” their edges surrounded by spiky, protruding nails. Recalling his first considerations of authenticity and stereotyping while at art school, and people’s expectations in relation to “Africanness,” the *Totem Paintings* (2011, p. 189) play with notions of the tribal in their menacing ornamentation. His series *Circular Fetish Paintings with Nails* (2012, fig. 1, p. 188) continues this exploration.

Shonibare has spoken at length about the influences upon his art. He cites feminist theory and deconstructionist literature as significant, particularly Jacques Derrida’s writings and “the debate about the grand narrative.”⁸ Fracturing this narrative into small pieces quite literally through his paintings—and then exploding it across the wall with an irreverent splash—he has also sought to dismantle grand narratives in history through his sculptures and installations, photographs, and films. Two of Shonibare’s sculptures of 1998–99 take the form of alien, rather than human, subjects. Carefully stitched and



Fig. 2. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Alien Woman on Flying Machine*, 2011. Steel, aluminum, brass, Dutch wax printed cotton, rubber; 150 x 450 x 400 cm

attired in a colorful skin of Dutch wax, his *Alien Obsessives* (p. 176) and *Dysfunctional Family* (p. 177) illustrate the idea of the outsider: of masquerading within the dominant culture while remaining peripheral or external to it. An experience common to so much of Britain's own ethnically and culturally diverse population, the idea of "difference"—with its inevitable questions of tradition, assimilation, contamination, and exchange—is tackled in Shonibare's work with a combination of allusion and wit. Two sculptures of 2011 return to this theme, featuring an alien man and woman in anachronistic flying machines (fig. 2, pp. 84–85). The works make cheeky reference to the notion of "alien invasion" and the arrival of people from diverse cultures on British shores as well as those of its former colonial outpost, Australia, which has a less-than-glowing record on the treatment of asylum seekers. This theme is further extended through his 2011 mural-scale *Alien Toy Painting* (pp. 192–93), with its characteristic

monochromatic background and fabric-covered roundels, which are decorated with plastic children's sci-fi figurines that fan around the perimeter of the paintings like halos.

Despite its intentionally benign exterior, the notion of the "alien" resonates for Shonibare with the language of immigration and exile. It echoes the literature of the prominent black writer James Baldwin, who famously wrote, on the subject of living in Europe, "I was a kind of bastard of the West . . . an interloper," and it also recalls Ralph Ellison's semifictional "invisible man," adrift and alone in subterranean New York.⁹ Describing the alien as "the colonial figure par excellence" and alien-invasion films as revealing the underlying fears of a nation, Shonibare concludes, "In the United States for a long time, the fear of communism prevailed. There is a lot of talk about 'bogus' asylum seekers in Britain now."¹⁰ Some of his sculptures invert this logic, instead projecting their human subjects out into deep space, handsomely attired in Dutch wax astronaut suits and bubble helmets. *Vacation* (2000, p. 164) presents the recognizable image of a nuclear family, but



Fig. 3. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, ca. 1750. Oil on canvas, 69.8 x 119.4 cm. National Gallery, London, bought with contributions from The Pilgrim Trust, The Art Fund, Associated Television Ltd, and Mr. and Mrs. W. W. Spooner, 1960

their holiday destination is far, far away. Playing on notions of the foreign and the exotic, this work also evokes the cultural tourism of the “well-to-do” to distant places they see only through the window of an air-conditioned car or hotel.

Art history has provided another rich source of subject matter for Shonibare, who has transformed well-known European paintings into three-dimensional *tableaux vivants* with a twist since the late 1990s. One example is Thomas Gainsborough’s *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (ca. 1750, fig. 3). This painting represents a wedding portrait as much as it does a statement about Britain’s landed gentry, embodied by the figures of a young couple seated before their vast estate. In Shonibare’s sculptural response of 1998 (p. 178), the couple is presented minus their heads—a playful reference to the beheading of the French aristocracy and the revolutionary redistribution of power and land scarcely forty years after Gainsborough’s painting. Shonibare comments, “It amused me to explore

the possibility of bringing back the guillotine in the late 1990s . . . for use on the historical icons of power and deference.”¹¹ He has further noted that the absence of heads in his sculptures removes direct connotations of race. Fascinated by the culture of eighteenth-century Europe and its aristocrats, with their love of frivolity and excess, Shonibare also cites the Rococo artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard as particularly influential. Fragonard’s paintings and sculptures are characterized by lavish depictions of the upper class at play, pursuing love, and enjoying the material comforts of their wealth. It cannot be lost on Shonibare that their vogue was ultimately short-lived and that Fragonard died in relative obscurity in 1806, while a number of his wealthy patrons met their fate at the guillotine the decade before.

Shonibare’s sculptural installation *The Swing (after Fragonard)* (2001, pp. 168–69) responds to Fragonard’s 1767 painting of the same name (fig. 4), depicting the sensual abandon of a privileged young woman at her leisure. The woman’s airborne slipper, kicked high as she swings back and forth before her lover, underlines the decadence of the original scene. A garter is exposed to view beneath her billowing dress and,



Fig. 4. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767. Oil on canvas, 81 x 64.2 cm. The Wallace Collection, London

scandalously, she is assisted in her tryst by a priest who obligingly pushes the swing. The concept of leisure is particularly significant for Shonibare. He observes: “To be in a position to engage in leisure pursuits, you need a few bob. . . . You need spare time and money buys you spare time. While the leisure pursuit might look frivolous . . . my depiction of it is a way of engaging with that power. It is actually an expression of something much more profoundly serious insofar as the accumulation of wealth and power that is personified in leisure was no doubt a product of exploiting other people.”¹² Shonibare’s ice-skating cleric of 2005 (fig. 5, pp. 64–65, 150–51), meanwhile, draws upon Sir Henry Raeburn’s painting *Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch* (ca. 1795, fig. 6). Depicting an unexpected pastime for a reverend, who would normally be painted in a more pious or solemn moment, Raeburn’s painting and Shonibare’s sculptural response combine playfulness and seriousness while turning conventional expectations upside down. Interestingly, Raeburn and his painting are often spoken of within the context of the

Scottish Enlightenment, a fact that will not be unknown to Shonibare. Linked to the accumulation of knowledge and, with it, power, wealth, and territorial expansion, the Enlightenment period has become a strong focus in Shonibare’s recent sculpture and photography.

Other related works by Shonibare include a “leisure lady” promenading with her canine companions (p. 173) and another, more ostentatiously, with three leashed ocelots (p. 170). Eighteenth-century fashionability, a love of exoticism, and the taming (or subordination) of wild nature are themes embodied in these sculptures. Speaking more widely about stereotypes and notions of the exotic, Shonibare drily observes: “These members of the aristocracy. . . are objects of curiosity, in a kind of reverse way. So the fetish for me, as an African, is the eighteenth-century European culture, whilst their fetish is the African mask!”¹³ Sculptures of an English foxhunt (p. 172) and of exquisitely dressed adults and children fishing, walking with stilts (pp. 148, 149), and riding unicycles (pp. 128, 129) continue the artist’s interest in leisure pursuits and their attendant associations of class.

With their high visual aesthetic and meticulous finish, it is very easy to be seduced by Shonibare’s paintings and sculptures. Underscored by themes of power and privilege, however, they reveal on closer inspection a less savory commentary on history and its repetitions. Shonibare has frequently cited his use of beauty as a device to draw in viewers and gain their attention before confronting them—ever so gently—with less palatable truths about the world in which we live. Describing himself foremost as “an aesthete, an artist” and claiming that “beauty . . . is just as important as the content,” he revels in the “paradox or contradiction” contained within his art.¹⁴ Shonibare’s labyrinthine exhibition *Jardin d’Amour* (*Garden of Love*, 2007) at the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, re-created a suite of allegorical paintings by Fragonard (pp. 138–39, 140, 141). The works draw a sharp parallel between prerevolutionary France and the contemporary culture of greed and excess that divides rich from poor and permeates the first world at the expense of the third. Selecting for his costumes Dutch wax fabrics patterned with luxury-goods logos, car designs, dollar bills, and coins, Shonibare says of the installation, “I am deliberately taking this period as a metaphor for the contemporary situation . . . showing very wealthy Europeans in very wealthy clothes, but because I changed their clothes into African textiles, I give an indication



Fig. 5. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Reverend on Ice*, 2005. Life-size mannequin, semi-opaque synthetic polymer resin, Dutch wax printed cotton, wool, leather, wood, steel; 160 x 402.3 x 601.5 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, purchased with the assistance of NGV Contemporary, 2006



Fig. 6. Sir Henry Raeburn, *Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch*, ca. 1795. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm. Scottish National Gallery, purchased 1949

that the luxury they enjoy, the labour of making the clothes is supplied by others who are less fortunate.”¹⁵

Shonibare’s installation is inspired by Fragonard’s 1771–73 painting cycle *The Progress of Love*, which was commissioned and then rejected by King Louis XV’s mistress, Madame du Barry, for her opulent château at Louveciennes. A commoner and a courtesan, Du Barry was famed for her extravagant taste and fashion while she was consort to the king. Like her regal rival Marie Antoinette, she eventually went to the guillotine in 1793 during the Reign of Terror—famously screaming and pleading on the scaffold, to the chagrin of her executioner. Shonibare’s interpretation of Fragonard’s vignette *The Progress of Love: The Lover Crowned* is particularly ironic as his own sculptural figures are of course already headless. A floral wreath held aloft (fig. 7) equally shifts in its meaning. Shonibare has described contemporary Europe as a “fruit basket” or “rich garden” to which other cultures look but are increasingly denied access.¹⁶ The ever-widening gulf between rich and poor and themes of discrimination and exclusion are symptomatic of the post-9/11 world we occupy. Refusing to take an overtly confrontational stance, unlike many of his contemporaries, Shonibare instead invites us to consider these polarities through the lessons of history and taste.

Shonibare’s *Jardin d’Amour* captures the last carefree moments of a regime on the brink of destruction, a theme that resonates powerfully in the present era of financial irresponsibility and collapse led by the banking institutions of America and Europe. The economic catastrophe that engulfs large parts of the Western world and its governments in 2013—Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Italy, for example—is a salient reminder of history’s repetitions and our inability to learn from the past. Greed and decadence are indeed recurring motifs in Shonibare’s art, and they find particular expression in scenes of feasting, excess, and merriment. *Party Time: Re-imagine America* (2008–9, pp. 114, 115) was commissioned for the centenary celebration of New Jersey’s Newark Museum and presented in the dining room of the museum’s 1885 Ballantine House, its festive table the site around which much adult misbehavior takes place. Another sculptural installation, *Last Supper (after Leonardo)* (2013, pp. 6, 70–71, 72–73), re-creates one of art history’s great themes, substituting Jesus and the apostles with thirteen men and women in ribald couplings around an over-laden table.

Speaking of his dinner-party works, Shonibare has described *Party Time* as ironic—a celebration of excess in a society that is failing. In his *Last Supper*, Christ is replaced by Bacchus, the Greek god of wine, and his “disciples” are represented in varying states of intoxication. Building on these installations are the *Champagne Kid* sculptures (2013, pp. 68, 69), also presented in states of inebriation. Perched upon their shoulders are globes that show graphs of financial markets around the world and chart the collapse of the banking system. A related sculpture (pp. 66, 67) depicts a finely dressed gentleman festively popping a champagne bottle; its contents spurt outward in a semenlike arc, a satirical reference to the contemporary “banker wanker.” In stark contrast are the artist’s *Food Faerie* sculptures of 2010 (pp. 92, 93), which carry food in their tiny baskets to distribute to the hungry of the world, and his *Homeless Man* (p. 75) and *Homeless Boy* (p. 74) of 2012. Both figures are bowed under the weight of the stacked suitcases upon their shoulders, and celestial globes in place of their heads bear inscriptions by the great Victorian-era novelist Charles Dickens. The artist’s 2008–11 sculptures of young children balancing upon globes of the Earth (pp. 118–19) depict infrared heat maps of regions affected by climate change, a bitter outcome of our excess consumption and exploitation of the planet’s fragile, finite resources—a critique continued in his 2009 series of collaged *Climate Shit Drawings* (pp. 194, 195).

While the eighteenth-century culture of excess has remained a persistent theme in Shonibare’s art, the expansionist era heralded by the nineteenth century holds an equally strong appeal. Introducing his major book on the subject, the historian A. N. Wilson observed, “The Victorians are still with us.”¹⁷ As a person living in England, surrounded by the vast architectural and technological legacy of the Victorian age, Shonibare has focused in considerable depth upon this defining period in the country’s history. The cultural inheritance of the era—of “Victorian” morality, manners, social structures, and notions of class—has been particularly significant and forms a recurring theme within Shonibare’s art. He says, “Living in England with my colonial relationship to this country one cannot escape all these Victorian things, because they are everywhere: in architecture, culture, attitude. . . . In the eighties, Margaret Thatcher started talking about bringing back Victorian values, the time when everything was so proper-proper. And I started to think: what do these



Fig. 7. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The Crowning* (detail), 2007. Two life-size mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton, shoes, coir matting, artificial silk flowers, mixed media; 160 x 280 x 210 cm. Commissioned by the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, for the exhibition *Jardin d'Amour*

Victorian ideas mean, why do we need to bring them back, what was so good about it all?”¹⁸ To view Shonibare’s comments as a simple critique would be erroneous. Instead they reveal a profound ambivalence toward the Victorian era that he has described as “a sort of love-hate thing,”¹⁹ acknowledging himself to be its product and inheritor.

Scramble for Africa (2003, pp. 27, 154–55, 156, 157) is a pivotal work for Shonibare in its exploration of late Victorian England and its territorial expansion into Africa during the 1880s. Wilson writes, “It has been observed by one of its liveliest historians that ‘the scramble for Africa bewildered everyone, from the humblest African peasant to the master statesmen of the age, Lord Salisbury and Prince Bismarck.’” In a speech in May

1886, Salisbury stated that when he left the Foreign Office in 1880 “nobody thought about Africa,” but when he returned to it five years later “the nations of Europe were almost quarrelling with each other as to the various portions of Africa which they could obtain. I do not exactly know the cause of this sudden revolution.”²⁰ The scramble for Africa by leading European and world powers resulted in the carving up of a continent, an act that was formalized at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85.²¹ Shonibare’s work depicts this historic gathering, capturing the various statesmen huddled around a table with a large map of Africa, eagerly staking their claims. In Shonibare’s interpretation, the heads of state are characteristically headless—and equally mindless in their hunger for what King Leopold II of Belgium called “a slice of this magnificent cake.”²²

The artist’s subsequent paintings *Black Gold I* (pp. 196–97) and *Black Gold II* (both 2006) continue themes of colonial domination and exploitation, bringing them into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as multinational companies greedily extract and export Africa’s natural resources while its people suffer and starve. The image of Cecil Rhodes, colonial politician and founder of De Beers Diamonds, also comes to mind. Immortalized in 1892 by the satirical magazine *Punch* as the rapacious “Rhodes Colossus,” he is shown straddling the African continent like his planned transcontinental telegraph service from Cape Town to Cairo (fig. 8). Rhodes once famously remarked, “I would annex the whole world. . . . I would if I could. . . . The planets . . . yes, the planets, if I could. I often think of that.”²³ This wishful thinking was not so far removed from the colonial reality—or that of the next century, with its space travel and moon landings. Needless to say, one of the first acts documented by NASA’s Apollo astronauts on their unwieldy Hasselblad cameras was the planting of the American flag on lunar soil (fig. 9).

Shonibare’s large installation *The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour* (1996–97, pp. 181, 182–83) extends the theme of wealth and its creation in the nineteenth century. Designed like a stage set that viewers can walk around, its provisional wall panels and floor supports reveal an opulent interior setting and furniture upholstered with Dutch wax fabrics. In the context of the work, the absent philanthropist is a double-edged entity who has likely generated his wealth through the labor of others. His philanthropic redistribution presumably does not equal the vast sum of his worth, and the motives for his



Fig. 8. “The Rhodes Colossus: Striding from Cape Town to Cairo,” from *Punch* magazine, December 10, 1892

largesse are unclear. The repeated motif of the black athlete appears upon the parlor’s Dutch wax wallpaper, inviting associations of “patronage” and the relationship between the colonial “haves” and the colonized “have-nots.”²⁴ The Victorian era was a time of enormous economic growth and prosperity for some. For others it was a time of grinding poverty, reaching a peak late in the century as England’s territorial ambitions stretched across the globe. *The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour* continues the artist’s interest in class and privilege. Its deliberately setlike presentation alludes, moreover, to our own fascination with the lives of the rich through history, as encountered through period re-creations and television dramas. A subsequent site-specific installation, commissioned for the period rooms of the Brooklyn Museum, features sculptures of well-to-do children hidden playfully amid the furniture of their parents’ homes (pp. 100–113). Titled *Mother and Father Worked Hard So I Can Play* (2009), the presentation referenced the material aspirations of settler arrivals in the “new world”



Fig. 9. *Cernan Jump Salutes Flag*, 1972. Eugene A. Cernan, Commander, Apollo 17, salutes the flag on the lunar surface during extravehicular activity (EVA) on NASA's final lunar landing mission. Digital photograph, NASA

of America and the luxurious indulgence of their beneficiaries, who may never need to work again.

Victorian morality represents a subject of much literary discussion. Equal if not greater interest has been aroused by its indiscretions and sexual mores, from the rumored relationship between Queen Victoria and her Scottish manservant John Brown to the flamboyant sexuality of cultural figures such as Oscar Wilde. Running distinctly contrary to the “proper-proper” Victorian veneer of manners and social acceptability—twin polarities described by A. N. Wilson as “appearance and reality”²⁵—the many inherent contradictions of Victorian culture have provided rich subject matter for Shonibare, culminating in his vast 2002 installation *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (pp. 158–59, 160, 161, 162–63). Inspired by the phenomenon of the Grand Tour, a seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century travel itinerary for the European upper classes, this work pulls back the curtain on Victorian propriety to reveal hidden intimacies and exchanges, including adultery (or “criminal conversation,” as it was then called).

“Grand Tourists” traditionally sought to improve and enlighten themselves through the study of European art, culture, and

history, visiting popular destinations such as Paris, Rome, and Venice. In Shonibare’s work, the Grand Tour is simultaneously revealed as a kind of covert sexual tourism, calling to mind, in turn, ugly contemporary connotations of foreign and exotic places and the (typically) white men who frequent them. Interestingly, historical references to “criminal conversation” commonly position women as active agents while their male companions are presumably excused from culpability (the lonely downfall of nineteenth-century adulteresses Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina comes to mind). This is an ironic inversion of Victorian attitudes to homosexuality, which Queen Victoria famously criminalized in 1885 for men but not for women, in the purported belief that same-sex female relations could not exist. As Shonibare’s fabulously attired 1999 sculptures *Victorian Couple* (p. 175), *Gay Victorians* (fig. 10), and *Affectionate Men* (p. 174) demonstrate, with their references to prominent Victorians of all sexual persuasions, nothing could be further from the truth.

Notions of contamination and contradiction are central to Shonibare’s artistic practice, and are expressed both in the use of Dutch wax fabric and in the conceptual basis of individual works. Writing on Shonibare’s art for the 2002 solo exhibition *Double Dutch*, Manthia Diawara described the Nigerian concept of the *been-tos*, “those Africans who adopted the English manners, the Queen’s English and Victorian style of dress.” Identifying the *been-to* as “a fake, a false Englishman; one who is a caricature of Englishness and therefore cannot be authentic,” he concluded that in today’s world, definitions have become so confused and communities so enmeshed that “it has become impossible to tell who is English and who is not, based on appearance, accent, and way of life alone. For Shonibare, the stereotype is all we have left to invoke Englishness, its different histories and futures.”²⁶ Shonibare’s photographs engage extensively with ideas about stereotype, as well as duality and masquerade, through the personae of the Victorian “dandy” (or social aspirant) and Oscar Wilde’s antihero Dorian Gray. Both “fakes” and rakes, the dandy and Gray are portrayed by Shonibare himself in the photographs, assuming costumes and theatrical makeup, with a cast of supporting actors.

Shonibare’s ambitious photographic suite *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998, pp. 218–19) has frequently been considered in relation to the satirical art of William Hogarth. A well-known painter and caricaturist of the eighteenth century, Hogarth



Fig. 10. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Gay Victorians*, 1999. Two life-size mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton, mixed media; 165.1 x 63.5 x 106.7 cm, 165.1 x 73.7 x 109.2 cm. Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan, fractional and promised gift to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

lampooned the rich and moralized to the poor through his art. He produced various didactic bodies of work first as paintings and then as prints, including *The Harlot's Progress* (1731); its sequel, *The Rake's Progress* (1734, fig. 11); *Marriage à-la-mode* (1743–45), with its ridiculing of upper-class vanities; and *Beer Street and Gin Lane* (1751). Shonibare's photographs resonate with *The Rake's Progress*, transposing the central character into the nineteenth century and following just one day in his life, unlike Hogarth's chronicle of Thomas Rakewell from his humble origins to success, dissipation, and eventual madness. Shonibare's work also avoids the moralizing tenor of Hogarth, celebrating excessiveness and decadence while inverting the stereotype of otherness through the figure of the black dandy, with his fawning white servants and acolytes. He says, "Rakewell spends his father's money extravagantly, gets into debt and ends up in a madhouse. My *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* is the opposite of that. My dandy has a wild time, has wild orgies, but he gets away with it. He challenges the notion of bourgeois morality."²⁷ Shonibare's work



Fig. 11. William Hogarth, *The Rake's Progress: 2. The Rake's Levée*, 1734. Oil on canvas, 63 x 75.5 cm. Sir John Soane's Museum, London

invokes contemporary associations of black social mobility. Parallels may also be drawn between the plush attire of Shonibare's dandy and the high style and "bling" of a new black social elite. The symbolic meanings of clothing and its transformative powers are many, and Shonibare's deep interest in fashion predates his career as an artist.²⁸ The acclaimed fashion designer Vivienne Westwood is particularly pertinent in this regard with her acute eye for "Britishness" and its deconstruction through style, wit, and unrepentant sexuality.

Diary of a Victorian Dandy is one of several works by Shonibare that do not feature Dutch wax fabric costumes. Instead the artist and his supporting cast wear conventional Victorian clothing, although any sense of authenticity is swiftly undermined by the exaggerated theatricality of each image. Originally shown as a commissioned project in the London Underground train network, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* differs structurally from Shonibare's paintings and sculptures. It constructs a clear durational narrative through five large prints, each numbered according to the hour at which it is set. Thus we learn that the dandy rises from bed at 11 a.m., conducts his business at 2 p.m., plays billiards at 5 p.m., attends a musical recital at 7 p.m., and indulges in sexual pleasures at 3 a.m. Themes of leisure and frivolity, self-invention, and social mobility are played out through the dandy, a contentious figure in English life whose circulation in upper-class circles was often linked to his style and wit. Shonibare has

described his attraction to the dandy as an “outsider” figure who “upsets the social order of things,”²⁹ a notion echoed by Charles Baudelaire: “They all partake of the same characteristic quality of opposition and revolt.”³⁰ *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* extends the artist’s interest in ambivalent states of being, touching on early works with their consideration of exclusion and otherness as well as later works with their focus on inclusion through class and privilege.

One recent interpretation has proposed the figure of Olaudah Equiano as a “poignant shadow” behind Shonibare’s dandy.³¹ Equiano was an educated, literate African slave who bought his freedom and settled in England. He married a white woman, campaigned tirelessly for the abolition of slavery, and chronicled his own experiences in an acclaimed autobiographical work of 1789. A “precursor” of sorts because of his outsider status and inversion of the social order, Equiano was one of few black figures in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English society who occupied positions of visibility and influence. Within a Pacific context there is the equally poignant shadow of Omai, a high-ranking political exile from Raiatea in the Society Islands. Omai accompanied Captain Cook on the ship *Adventure* from Tahiti to Portsmouth, England, in 1774. He was the first Pacific Islander to visit London, where he caused a stir among its upper-class circles. A “social lion” noted for his gracious manners and extensive tailor’s bills,³² he was presented to King George III, painted by Joshua Reynolds, and even became the subject of a hugely popular pantomime, *OMAI: Or, the Trip Round the World*, at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden in 1786. Omai’s good fortune was, however, very short-lived, and he returned to the Society Islands in 1776 to political turmoil and unrest, abandoned by his former British patrons on Huahine, an island that was not his own. There his experiences in London were met with local indifference. He was unable to reclaim his father’s Raiatean estate and reportedly died of disease in 1779.

Shonibare’s second photographic suite considers the late Victorian literary creation Dorian Gray. Oscar Wilde, considered a consummate dandy of the Victorian age, completed his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in 1890 while at the height of his social and literary career. Wilde’s novel tells the story of a handsome young man who sells his soul to the devil in order to remain forever young, a hidden portrait painting capturing the effects of his age and increasing moral corruption

over the next eighteen years. Themes of decadence and late Victorian aestheticism permeate the book, while the duality of its protagonist finds literary parallels in other Victorian-era novellas, including Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, published four years earlier and admired by Wilde.

Like Stevenson’s book before it, Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* was the subject of stage adaptations and in 1945 became a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film under the direction of Albert Lewin. It is this predominantly black-and-white film adaptation that fuels Shonibare’s own photographs as much as the original novel. In choosing to make all but one of his photographs black and white (unlike the colorful *Victorian Dandy* photographs), Shonibare emulates the look of the film still and relates the idea of duality back to the black-and-white film medium. Another duality or inversion is evident in Shonibare’s substitution of the original Dorian Gray, a nineteenth-century white Englishman, with his own countenance. It is interesting to note that in his preface to the novel, Wilde invokes Shakespeare’s *Tempest* with its black trickster and “wild man,” Caliban, a character that Shonibare has since addressed obliquely in his recent works.

In a pivotal moment in Lewin’s film, an ever-youthful Dorian Gray stands before his wizened, corrupted portrait and understands that a symbolic transference has taken place between himself and his image. In that brief moment we see the portrait in vivid Technicolor: eyes bulging, hair on end, and hands bloodied. Shonibare’s solitary color photograph depicts the artist as Dorian Gray standing before a gilded mirror and encountering his own reflection. The face that stares back is hideously scarred and disfigured like the portrait, in contrast to Shonibare’s black-and-white image of the same encounter. Tellingly, Wilde says in his preface, “The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.”³³ James Baldwin’s poignant observation in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) forms a fitting response: “When, beneath the black mask, a human being begins to make himself felt one cannot escape a certain awful wonder as to what sort of human being it is. . . . It is one of the ironies of black-white relations that, by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is.”³⁴

Notions of the “fake” and the “trickster” are variously explored in the literature surrounding Shonibare, with some accounts citing the Yoruba trickster-god Eshu and his two-sided black-and-red hat as a reference point.³⁵ Inextricably linked to the artist’s ideas about authenticity and contamination, Shonibare’s dandy and villain are essentially ambivalent creations, the latter manifesting his duality as a confrontation between art (imitation) and origin (the “real”) through the symbolic motif of the portrait painting. They are also fakes twice removed, first from the original they sought to emulate (an aristocrat, a beautiful young man) and second by Shonibare’s own revision. If Shonibare sees an element of himself within the characters that he occupies, then it is one defined by masks and mutation, suggesting that individual identity is in a constant state of play.

Two subsequent photographic series by the artist extend these themes: one through the character of Willy Loman, the troubled protagonist of Arthur Miller’s 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*, and the other through Admiral Horatio Nelson, the celebrated naval commander who led the British to victory against the French at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. *Willy Loman: The Rise and Fall* (2009, pp. 208, 209) is Shonibare’s only photographic series so far that is situated firmly within the present. It unfolds in an unadorned warehouse with a concrete floor and whitewashed walls, and most of its characters are naked except for Loman, who wears a Dutch wax jacket and trousers. Reflective of a new austerity precipitated by the European financial crisis, it situates Loman in the seven circles of hell, with each photograph modeled upon an etching by Gustave Doré. *Willy Loman* offers a flip side to Shonibare’s Victorian dandy, its protagonist being instead a man of profound self-doubt and delusion who does not “get away with it” and eventually commits suicide by crashing his car at the play’s conclusion. He is, however, a rake and a fake, like his Victorian-era counterpart, something that only his son Biff recognizes when he cries angrily, “You fake! You phony little fake! You fake!”³⁶ Shonibare’s photographs are augmented by a life-size sculpture of the fated car, tilted to one side with its headless driver slumped behind the wheel. The notion of fakery is playfully extended in Shonibare’s latest photographic series, *Fake Death Pictures* (2011, fig. 12, pp. 204–5, 206, 207): five highly theatrical images that insert the figure of Admiral Nelson into historical paintings of death scenes, among them Henry Wallis’s *The Death of Chatterton* (1856) and Édouard Manet’s *The*

Suicide (1877–81). In three of the *Fake Death Pictures*, Nelson perishes by his own hand, like Willy Loman at the wheel of his car, although the resulting images revel in pomp and overt artifice. In their representation of the great naval leader’s death, Shonibare’s staged photographs echo the demise of the social order itself. Speaking about the works, he has also suggested that they reflect the zeitgeist of the times, the death of colonial power, and the rise of new regional superpowers such as India and China. As old powers such as England fade, the developing countries become like “new colonials,” building stature and wealth—and so the wheels of history turn once more.

A related sculpture, *Cannonball Heaven* (2011, pp. 80–81), literally softens, or neutralizes, Nelson’s (and thus empire’s) power. Based upon the cannons on HMS *Victory*, the work features two headless gentleman soldiers firing colorful fabric balls into the corner of the gallery. Shonibare comments that wars rarely happen in order to protect human rights. Rather, they occur in order to secure power, territory, and big economic agendas—such as Britain’s control over the seas and thus trade. *Cannonball Heaven* presents a futile scenario and also a paradox: one in which war is suggested but effectively unable to be realized. One might also conclude that, here, the men of power (and their balls) are rendered impotent.

Writers on Shonibare’s art have so far paid little attention to its cinematic aspects. They bear further examination, however, particularly in light of recent film works that tease out the relationship between still and moving art forms. Extending the range of his practice, Shonibare made his first film, *Un Ballo in Maschera* (*A Masked Ball*) (pp. 226–27) in 2004, inspired by the 1792 assassination of King Gustav III of Sweden at a masked ball in Stockholm. An elaborate costume drama featuring performers in Dutch wax ball gowns, frock coats, and ornate Venetian-style masks, Shonibare’s film represents one of his most technically complex projects to date. Aristocracy and play, frivolity and excess are themes within the film, which takes its title from Giuseppe Verdi’s 1859 opera on the same subject. *Un Ballo in Maschera* is followed by a second film, *Odile and Odette* (2005, pp. 224, 225), a considerably more pared-back production featuring two ballerinas who face each other on either side of a gilded frame. Their graceful movements mirror each other as though they are a single body in reflection, a notion that is disrupted only by the contrasting colors of the women’s skin.



Fig. 12. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Fake Death Picture (The Death of Chatterton—Henry Wallis)*, 2011. Digital chromogenic print, ed. of 5; 194 x 148.9 cm (framed)

Odile and Odette is inspired by Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake*, which premiered in Moscow in 1877. In the ballet the princess Odette has been cursed by the evil sorcerer Von Rothbart to live as a swan by day and a woman by night. Von Rothbart disguises his daughter, Odile, to resemble Odette, except that she wears black instead of white, and Prince Siegfried mistakenly swears to marry her, leading to tragedy for Odette and Siegfried. In Tchaikovsky's ballet, the roles of Odile and Odette are traditionally performed by one ballerina with two costumes. Shonibare's interpretation extends the theme of blackness and whiteness in his juxtaposition of the two dancers, and

calls into question the Western binary opposition in which negative or "dark" forces are polarized against positive, "light" ones. A third, more recent film titled *Addio del Passato* (2011, pp. 220–21, 222–23) furthers Shonibare's exploration of the moving-image format. In this work, a black female opera singer has been "blind cast" by Shonibare to play the role of Admiral Nelson's estranged wife, singing Violetta's famed death lament from *La Traviata* by Verdi (1853). Her lament is repeated three times with subtle variations in staging, recalling the narrative loop of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and is periodically intercut by watery images of Nelson with his consort, Lady Hamilton. It is further disrupted by meticulous restagings of Shonibare's *Fake Death Pictures* of Nelson's demise. It will not be lost on the artist that Nelson's greatest naval triumph at Trafalgar also resulted in his death, shot through the

spine onboard the HMS *Victory*. History painters have represented the idea of the noble death and apotheosis, or transformation from the human to the divine realm, in depictions of Captain Cook (who was famously murdered by the “natives” at Kealakekua Bay, Hawaii) and Admiral Nelson after Trafalgar. Shonibare’s film and alternative *Fake Death* scenarios puncture the nationalistic rhetoric and reification of the great naval hero, using mimicry and repetition instead to signal the decline of an empire.

Shonibare’s embrace of film over the last decade marks a significant turning point for the artist. Moving between static and time-based art forms, he explores the idea of film as a “moving tableau” or animated painting with its luminous surfaces, sumptuous attention to detail, and strong compositional effects. The link between Shonibare’s photography and film is equally strong, shifting between color and black and white and between the notion of the film still versus the moving tableau. Narrative is a central concern for Shonibare, introduced by the diaristic format and titling of his *Victorian Dandy* photographs and the sequential, cinematic presentation of his *Dorian Gray* images. Inversion and doubling also figure strongly, as illustrated by the cyclical, looped format of Shonibare’s films: King Gustav III, for example, gets up to dance once more after being assassinated, while Nelson’s wife repeats her lament over and over. Shonibare expressed his interest in film and narrative structures in the detailed interview that is included within this publication, noting, “I did not want to make a film with a beginning, middle, and end; instead, I wanted to explore the reflexivity of the film and how it reflects back on itself.”³⁷ Speaking of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, he could equally have been referring to *Odile and Odette*, with its literal mirroring of form and content, or *Addio del Passato*. Shonibare also cites the French New Wave directors, including Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard, as significant. Akira Kurosawa’s cinematic masterpiece *Rashomon* (1950), with its self-referential structure and four alternating perspectives on one story, might offer another interesting counterpoint. In the latter film a brutal rape and murder in ancient Japan are replayed through the eyes of a bandit, a samurai and his wife, and a woodcutter. One character is the crime’s perpetrator, one is its witness, and two are its apparent victims, yet each account varies greatly and the truth remains indistinct. Ambiguity and contradiction—key themes for Shonibare—are central to the film, as is its non-linear, story-within-a-story format. Shonibare, like Kurosawa,

cross-examines truth and fiction in his art, ultimately revealing “history” itself as a malleable human construction.

Like truth and fiction, reason and its opposite are recurring motifs for Shonibare. Embodied in the principles of the Age of Enlightenment, they are explored in depth in the artist’s sculptural and photographic works of 2008 and beyond. As the eminent scholar Peter Gay observed, “The Enlightenment may have been a consequence and expression of a revolution in men’s minds; it was also one of its principal causes.”³⁸ Enlightenment thinking affected powerfully the political, economic, scientific, and social fabric of eighteenth-century Europe. Fluid as a “movement” and comprising many contradictory voices, the Enlightenment was nonetheless pivotal in shaping intellectual attitudes about the nature of man, rationality, and individual will versus authority. Shonibare’s 2008 *Age of Enlightenment* sculptures (pp. 120–25) take five *philosophes* as their subjects: Immanuel Kant, Antoine Lavoisier, Jean le Rond d’Alembert, Adam Smith, and Gabrielle Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, Marquise du Châtelet. Each sculpture is given a physical disability, a rare autobiographical reference to Shonibare’s own disability and equally a suggestion that even reason has its vulnerabilities.³⁹ Thus we encounter Kant as a double amputee, Smith with a hunchback, Lavoisier in a wheelchair, and d’Alembert and Le Tonnelier with wood prosthetic limbs. With his extensive makeup effects, Shonibare’s *Dorian Gray* is perhaps an unlikely precursor (or “shadow”) for the disfigurements presented in these works. Yet the earlier work, with its emphasis on duality and the nature of man, is interesting on both a personal and empirical level.

Shonibare’s 2008 photographs *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (fig. 13, pp. 210–11, 212, 213) rework Francisco de Goya’s 1799 etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (fig. 14). In the original etching we see Goya asleep at his desk, a billowing mass of creatures rising about him as irrational nocturnal fears take their hold. Goya’s etching served as the frontispiece for his print suite *Los Caprichos*, a satirical critique of Spanish moral values, political corruption, and the debauchery of the clergy. Shonibare’s interpretation restages the original image in five variations, each representing a world continent (Europe, Africa, America, Asia, and Australia). The sleeping figure differs in each photograph and is at odds with the continent he represents: a white man for Africa, an African man for Asia, and so forth. These images bring together the



Fig. 13. Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Asia)*, 2008. Chromogenic print mounted on aluminum, ed. of 5; 207 x 147.3 cm (framed)

concerns that have shaped Shonibare’s art since the mid-1990s, with their breaking down of grand narratives and contamination of ideas. In all five of them the specter of unreason hovers nearby, its presence a constant reminder that we humans are not perfect, rational, or enlightened all the time.

In his 1784 essay “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” the philosopher Kant cried, “Sapere aude! ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.” Explaining that the individual must learn to think independently, “unfettered” by authority, he proposed that enlightenment “is the freedom to make public use of one’s reason at every point.”⁴⁰ Shonibare draws a literary parallel between the Enlightenment ideal of reason (or “illumination”) and its “dark” opposite through the presence of Caliban, Prospero’s deformed slave in *The Tempest*. Introduced as “a freckled whelp . . . not honoured with a human shape,”⁴¹ Caliban is the



Fig. 14. Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (El sueño de la razón produce monstruos)*, plate 43 from *Los Caprichos (The Caprices)*, first edition, 1799. Etching and aquatint printed in sepia ink, 18.3 x 12.2 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1976

orphaned “bastard” offspring of a witch called Sycorax. A large 2008 sculpture by Shonibare of a keeling ship (p. 127) alludes to the play’s central narrative, in which a group of royal Italian seafarers is shipwrecked upon Caliban’s magical island.⁴²

Written as a comedy, Shakespeare’s play contains serious themes about the intersection of reason and irrationality, darkness and light. Initially Prospero seeks to “civilize” Caliban, teaching him his European religion and language. When Caliban errs, however, Prospero enslaves him. Caliban’s resistance may be read as the confrontation between colonizer and colonized, and his words are revealing: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!”⁴³ The cultural theorist Homi K. Bhaba’s observations resonate at all levels: