



IN THE LINE OF FIRE: YINKA SHONIBARE PRODUCED CANNONBALL HEAVEN (2011) FOR THE FUTURE OF THE PAST EXHIBITION AT CAAM, SPAIN



FREEDOM FIGHTER

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES AND ARTISTIC BOUNDARIES CAN'T CONTAIN BRITISH-NIGERIAN ARTIST YINKA SHONIBARE MBE. AND WITH TWO NEW PUBLIC WORKS ON THE WAY, THAT'S A GOOD THING

INTERVIEW LARRY OSSEI-MENSAH INTRODUCTION CARINYA SHARPLES

"I am a citizen of the world in the way that Picasso was. He chose his influences from wherever he wanted." British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE does not let time, geography or expectation restrict him when it comes to finding new inspiration. In his recent exhibition *Addio del Passato* at New York's James Cohan Gallery (featured in Issue 15 of *ARISE*), the 2004 Turner Prize finalist's muses included Lord Nelson, Verdi's *La Traviata* and ancient sex aids.

Recurring themes do appear in his work though, most frequently colonialism, post-colonialism and the tangled roots of African and European history, art and culture. His use of wax print fabrics has become something of a signature, popping up on everything from the sails of his *Nelson's Ship In A Bottle* (now on display outside London's Maritime Museum) to the dancer's tutu in *Globe Head Ballerina*, his new installation for the exterior of the Royal

Opera House. His popular appeal is similarly global: over the years Shonibare has exhibited everywhere from the National Museum of African Art and Brooklyn Museum to Tate Britain and Trafalgar Square.

Born in London, Shonibare moved to Lagos aged three and only returned to the UK years later to study fine art at Goldsmiths College and Central Saint Martins (then Byam Shaw College of Art). He still lives in London, where he is getting ready to unveil another public installation – exact details of which were yet to be announced at the time of print. Right now he has a solo show, *Invasion, Escape; Aliens Do It Right!* at Sydney's Anna Schwartz Gallery; a group exhibition, *Love And Africa*, coming to Houston's Menil Collection in December; and another solo show at Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2013. And there is also the Deloitte Ignite 2012, a three-day cultural festival Shonibare is curating at the Royal Opera House from August 31 to September 2. >

Africa is one of the most creative continents on the planet and I think that to not support that creativity is a waste

How important is the fluidity of culture in your work? Such as referencing colonial times to speak about what's happening now.

For me, Africans are inspired by everything that Europeans are. And what is very interesting is that the whole history of Modernism was actually created by the influence of African art on Picasso. Here was an artist of Spanish origin living in France, who took his influence from Africa to produce his work. Nobody would ever question that for one second. Now if an African wanted to be as free as Picasso, like myself – and I choose to take things from European culture as just another influence in the way that Picasso did with African art – it becomes a big issue. There is an assumption that I should stay in Africa and close my eyes. The show that I have at James Cohan Gallery is influenced by Italian opera and British colonial history. I mix all those things together because I believe that I'm just as free as Picasso. People should get used to it. Africans are well travelled now and we can do whatever we want.

Last April you gave a talk at Terra Kulture in Lagos. Do you have any plans to return?

CCA Lagos invited me to make a show in Lagos but I couldn't find an appropriate space to show my work – not because there are no spaces but I didn't want to compromise on the scale and quality of the show. So I'm looking for collaborators who will help me realise a proper exhibition in Lagos. I don't know if the space will need to be built or adapted, but my dream is to share my work with people in Lagos the same way I share it in New York, London and everywhere else. I don't want the constraints of the infrastructure to reduce the quality of what I show my own people.

How did your parents feel when you told them that you wanted to be an artist?

Let's put it this way: it was not really well received. I think, in a way, my parents had my interests at heart, they were really trying to look after me. As I got older I understood their disapproval – basically they couldn't figure out



how I was going to make a living if I was an artist. Of course it is very different now. Being an artist doesn't necessarily mean that you are going to be impoverished. In fact if I had chosen the profession they'd wanted for me I may not have been as successful as I am. But I can understand that in Africa it's quite difficult to make a living being a visual artist.

What do you think it would take to make parents, communities and the government in Nigeria understand the importance of arts and culture?

Artists can exist if they are supported by society as a whole. We have to start to create an audience in Africa. I went to Nigeria in April [2011] and saw the beautiful hotels built in Lagos. While those places are kind of wonderful, a fraction of the budget spent on them could be used to build a beautiful museum. If you don't have the basic infrastructure to support creativity you can't really have an art industry. Artists need spaces where they can show their work. They need art fairs where people can trade. They need auction houses and they need writers and critics. That way you start to build an infrastructure, an audience. An artist cannot create a career alone. Africa is probably one of the most creative continents on the planet

FABRIC OF HISTORY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): GLOBE HEAD BALLERINA (2012) AT LONDON'S ROYAL OPERA HOUSE; NELSON'S SHIP IN A BOTTLE (2010) - SINCE RELOCATED TO THE MARITIME MUSEUM; THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS (AFRICA) (2008); REVOLUTION KID (CALF) (2012); SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA (2003)

and I think that to not support that creativity is a waste. A lot of contemporary African artists get collected all over the world, so we are actually losing our heritage elsewhere. And that's a tragedy. I think it's a case of misplaced priorities. The creativity is there, the money is there – money is not really a problem in Africa as such and there's also a sizeable middle class. I was blown away by the size of the telecoms industry when I was out there.

How can a young or established African artist establish global relevance beyond Africa?

A good example is El Anatsui. He works in Nigeria and has a global reputation. He is a senior artist; a very well-respected man and he managed to do it purely on the quality of his work. I think the most you can do is just to

PHOTOS COURTESY: STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY



THE BOOMING NIGERIAN ART MARKET

Tiwani Contemporary

Maria Varnava, director of Tiwani Contemporary – the new London gallery focusing on contemporary art from Nigeria, Africa and its diaspora – on the Nigerian art market.

El Anatsui's New World Map just sold at Bonham's in London for almost US\$860,000. Another of his works sold in a charity auction at Bonham's New York for US\$720,000. That's a great success.

The serious collector sees and follows the trend for African art. They see that the Tate has the African acquisition committee, auction results, artists gaining presence in important art fairs, and galleries including the work of contemporary artists from Africa and the diaspora in their programmes.

The art market in Nigeria is steadily maturing. Art House and other auction houses in Nigeria are doing very well, and many younger collectors are getting

more active. Many in Nigeria have started to consider collecting as a form of investment.

The coming of the auction house to Nigeria has promoted transparency of prices but also it gives 'the reasoning' of the value of a piece of art by providing its provenance, where it has been exhibited and literature it has been included in. The local market is dynamic.

Right now Europe is shaky – we're going through difficult times. But Africa is booming. In many African countries you have a level of stability that didn't exist before, a strong middle class and a younger generation of Africans who are more interested in the cultural productivity of their countries and buying into their cultures – as we've seen before in the Chinese, Argentinean, Russian and Asian markets.

In Nigeria, painting and sculpture reign supreme but slowly, with institutions like the Centre For Contemporary Arts, Lagos, we have younger artists exploring alternative media and creating a vibrant and dynamic local contemporary art scene.

WORDS: LARA AKINAWO

continue to make strong pieces. But establishing an audience and a market for artists is the best way, and museums do that very well. We don't have enough in Africa. In Europe every town has a museum, even if it's a small one. We need to start doing something like that.

Are there any young artists in Africa or from the diaspora on your radar?

I can't think of one name right now, but in London I have a warehouse space in the East End of London called Guest Projects, which is part of my studio. There is a box outside and artists put in proposals there. I've been doing this for about four years and I have three exhibitions a year to promote the work of younger artists. I'm very interested in artists who push the boundaries so I've had a lot of crazy performances. I'm always looking for ideas that maybe the most established museums find to be too challenging. I want to have one month in which I do African art and invite proposals from young African artists.

What advice would you give to any emerging artists in terms of progressing and not getting discouraged?

The first thing that you have to say to yourself is that you are not the only artist in the

world and you are not the best artist in the world. So what that means is that your eyes have to be open and you have to be like a cultural sponge. You have to absorb, absorb, absorb. Look, look, look. Go around museums. Look at the work of other artists. Read art publications to keep up with what is going on. Because seeing what is out there is the only way you will know what you don't want to do and what your own preferences are – and that is how you develop your art as an artist.

How has your disability empowered you as an artist?

My disability happened when I was 19. I got a virus infection in my spine that left me completely paralysed and over the period I've slowly recovered. Art has really kept me going because there is a lot that I wanted to say, share with people and express. I think my love of art is so great that I've not allowed any obstacles to stop me doing it. I'm very determined, very focused and very passionate about it – and I think that is important. I've just been driven by my love of art. Nothing has been in my way, or I haven't allowed anything else. ●