



Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Ruins Decorated*. Installation View: Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, 2018.

Distinctive Celebrations: Yinka Shonibare's 'Ruins Decorated'

Yinka Shonibare MBE

By Tymon Smith

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"It's almost as if I never actually made the work that I made before, because I have to constantly remind people that the essentialist position often leads to disaster, as we found out in the second world war," says Yinka Shonibare MBE sitting in the shadow of the bookshelves that house the 4000 batik wrapped books that make up his African Library Exhibit at the Goodman Gallery. *The African Library* forms part of 'Ruins Decorated', his first show in Africa since 2003.

Shonibare, one of the Young British Artists generation has been challenging notions of fixed identity and national culture for three decades. His remark is made in the context of a reflection on the ways in which these ideas – many of which were debated heatedly in the increasingly multicultural Britain in which he began his career – seem to be taking hold once again on both sides of the political spectrum in Europe and America. Batik may be the fabric of choice for this year's *Black Panther* Wakanda parading red-carpet celebrities but – as Shonibare has been consistently pointing out in his work over the years – the idea of it as a fabric representing the post-colonial pride of the African continent can only ever be symbolic. In reality it's made in Manchester and exported back to the continent, a cross cultural hybrid that's tied up with the history of colonialism.

Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The African Library* (Detail), 2018.

The African Library, which takes up the main space of the gallery, consists of 4000 books, wrapped in the fabric, on whose spines are printed names of individuals who have made contributions to nation building across the continent in the post-colonial period. They include figures from across different eras and areas – sciences, music, politics, and literature. I ask Shonibare about his criteria for the selection – Jacob Zuma sits alongside Kwame Nkrumah, Bridgette Mabandla not far from Jonas Savimbi. Shonibare is keen to emphasise that he doesn't wish, "to make moral judgments because the independence struggle was a very complicated thing and it came off the back of a lot of trauma and their might be African leaders who were champions of the struggle but when they got power the ended up being dictators themselves." For Shonibare the work should be read as a whole as a celebration of African achievement and a tonic to the frustration expressed by many commentators, "that things are not happening that quickly but if you think about it Europe took 2000 years so you can't have a quick fix in any society."

The library also includes an interactive element in which viewers can learn more about each of the names on the books. For the selection, Shonibare approached experts and academics at London's School of African and Oriental Studies to propose candidates before making his final choices. *The African Library* is a reiteration of previous similar projects the artist undertook in Britain and the US where his emphasis was on the contribution that immigrants had made to the cultural and intellectual life of those countries. It is like his series of *Wind Sculptures* – one of which will become part of the Norval Foundation collection next year – a transportable concept that can be tailored according to the conditions and circumstances of exhibition and distinctly recognizable as a distinctively Shonibare creation with its mix of colourful textiles, challenging of conventional wisdoms and careful attention to research and the sharing of information with its audience.

When an artist of Shonibare's status who's been working for as long as he has makes his first appearance in over a decade on the continent, it's a bit like the visit of a major rock star – will he only play hits off his latest album or will he deliver some of the greatest hits for eager fans who don't know if they'll get another chance to see him? Shonibare is aware of this and hopes that the show will reflect his attempt to, "try and show the different ways in which I work. So you've got the installation, you've got the sculptures, you've got the film and photography but they're all linked."

The first work you see upon entering is a reconfiguration of classical sculpture – draped in batik and wearing a globe in place of a head. It's titled *Clementia* and Shonibare chose the title because of its symbolic link to the idea of reconciliation, a central idea in his consideration of South Africa, which "symbolises the bringing together of people and is also a symbol of forgiveness." The sculpture also upends the historical narrative of white supremacy, in which the white marble of classical sculpture was declared by art historian Johann Winckelmann to be evidence of white superiority – an idea championed by Adolf Hitler who personally owned the famous discus thrower sculpture. Shonibare's figures are not only draped in batik fabric but their forms are covered in the patterns and their globe

heads serve as a symbol of universality. Like their classical predecessors these works are representations of power and achievement but “decorated in the wrong colours.” Shonibare sees them as a challenge to the Brexit era collective amnesia and refusal to accept multiculturalism as the new norm for Britain and European culture. “My position is the opposite and I like to think that I deliberately don’t stick to the boundaries of where an artist is meant to – I move beyond that and try to transcend it.”

Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Clementia*, 2018. Fibreglass sculpture, hand-painted with Batik pattern, and steelbase plate or plinth.

The other part of the show consists of the film *Addio Del Passato* – a reinterpreted performance of the adagio from La Traviatta in which a colonial hero betrays his wife and falls from grace – and a series of paintings in which Lord Nelson’s death is reimagined through a series of famous classical paintings depicting death. Shonibare says that for him, “death is not necessarily a negative thing. Death is about new

beginnings and the possibility to create something new and so Nelson then becomes the central metaphor for this irony of death that is depicted through the history of painting.”

As one of the first black artists to break it big in the late 20th century scene, Shonibare is buoyed by the current state of the art world in general in which, “there is a thirst for something different. In America some of the biggest artists right now are people like Kerry James Marshall, Mark Bradford, and that wasn’t possible before. So I think there is a growing awareness and I’m not pessimistic.” He hopes that ‘Ruins Decorated’ will spark debate and that it comments on real issues that resonate with South African audiences because he still firmly believes as he always has, “that art should be accessible even when its dealing with very serious issues and it should always be a conversation that people can have.”

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