

Yinka Shonibare MBE Manifests the Ghost of Manhattan's Oldest House

by Allison Meier on May 6, 2015



Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Boy Doing Headstand" (2009), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton, mixed media, installed in the 1776 George Washington bedchamber and study at the Morris-Jumel Mansion. (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Morris-Jumel Mansion in Washington Heights has long been rumored a haunted house, with the ghost of its longest resident Eliza Jumel spotted creeping on its creaking floors. In *Colonial Arrangements*, a site-specific exhibition in partnership with the Historic House Trust, UK-born Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE conjures Eliza's specter with headless mannequins clothed in Dutch wax fabric lurking in the period rooms. Simultaneously, he engages with the history of Manhattan's oldest house, which is celebrating its 250th anniversary up on its hill overlooking the Harlem River.



Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Planets In My Head, Arts" (2011), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton, fiberglass globe, violin, and leather, installed in the 1790 dining room

Some of *Colonial Arrangements* is from Shonibare's *Mother and Father Worked Hard So I Can Play* series, which played in the period rooms of the Brooklyn Museum in 2009. The vibrant fabric in contrasting patterns sewn into 19th and 18th-century inspired attire animates works like the "Boy Doing Headstand" (2009) in the bedchamber and study used by George Washington in 1776, which gets a sort of *Exorcist* creepiness when viewing its decapitated body bending backwards from down the hall. Downstairs a later piece, "Planets In My Head, Arts" (2011), plays the violin with a black fiberglass globe for a head, its shadow falling from the 1790 dining room into the servant passageway, poised between the class boundary contained even in a single room. Shonibare has long used the Dutch wax fabric for its global origins and issues of authenticity, as it's now associated with West Africa, but was appropriated from Indonesian batik and manufactured in Europe. Period rooms of historic houses have their own authenticity issues, their centuries-old scenes having an accuracy that is often mostly conjectured, making them a responsive setting for Shonibare's work.

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Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Seated Girl" (2009), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton, mixed media, installed in the 1826-30 Eliza Jumel dressing room.



Yinka Shonibare MBE, "The Ghost of Eliza Jumel (Sculpture)" (2015), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, and steel plate, installed in the 1826-30 Eliza Jumel bedchamber.

The strongest piece was created specifically to mingle and manipulate the mansion setting, with the “Ghost of Eliza Jumel” appearing periodically downstairs in a modified antique mirror inspired by the 1862 Pepper’s ghost illusion, and the full-size mannequin upstairs that skulks in Eliza’s 1826–30 bedchamber, reflected in another towering mirror. Eliza Jumel is an illusive figure. In some reports she was the daughter of a prostitute, while she fueled rumors George Washington was her father, and convinced the wealthy Stephen Jumel to marry her as she faked terminal illness and wished only to wed before her certain death. When Stephen Jumel died in 1832, after a fall in a carriage ride that has its own suspicions, the then-wealthiest woman in the country married a post-Alexander Hamilton killing Aaron Burr. They divorced in 1836,

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and an increasingly eccentric Eliza remained at the Washington Heights mansion until her death in 1865 (her lengthy *New York Times* obituary is an impressive mingling of fuzzy facts, including a possible dalliance with Benedict Arnold and witty days as part of the French court). There's some speculation that her later reclusive life inspired the eerie Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. At one point, to cleanse her legacy, the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1921 rechristened the mansion "Washington's Headquarters" and sold off her personal letters.

In Shonibare's installation, her faceless ghost reaches out from beneath a red shroud decorated with yellow butterflies. The Morris-Jumel Mansion has a dense history, with the first owner Roger Morris fleeing during the Revolution due to his loyalty to the British, later George Washington temporarily moved in, then there was Stephen Jumel fleeing the slave uprising in Haiti where his family owned a plantation, and, most notably for New Yorkers, its transformation into one of the city's first historic house museums in 1904. Yet in Eliza's phantom wavering between truth and speculation, Shonibare seems to have found the perfect embodiment of the complications of class, history, and identity.



Yinka Shonibare MBE, "The Ghost of Eliza Jumel" (2015), modified antique mirror, installed in the 1830 front parlor room.

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Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Planets In My Head, Arts" (2011) (detail), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton, fiberglass globe, violin, and leather, installed in the 1790 dining room



Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Boy Doing Headstand" (2009), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton, mixed media, installed in the 1776 George Washington bedchamber and study.

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Yinka Shonibare MBE, "The Ghost of Eliza Jumel (Sculpture)" (2015), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, and steel plate, installed in the 1826-30 Eliza Jumel bedchamber.



Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Girl On Scooter" (2009), fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton, leather, and wood, installed in the 1820-30 Mary Bowen's bedchamber.

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Outside Morris-Jumel Mansion



Entrance to the Morris-Jumel Mansion

Yinka Shonibare MBE: Colonial Arrangements *continues through August 31 at Morris-Jumel Mansion (65 Jumel Terrace, Washington Heights, Manhattan).*