

Delson, Susan, "Artist Conjures Ghost of a Long-Ago Star," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2015. Accessed online: <http://on.wsj.com/1GApKoW>



JAMES COHAN GALLERY

BY SUSAN DELSON

If People magazine had existed in the early 1800s, Eliza Jumel would have been a natural for the cover—and not just once.

She might have scored first in the 1790s, as a New York actress known for her wit, beauty and influential friends. And then again in 1810, as half of a wealthy power couple just moving into the magnificent Washington Heights estate now known as the Morris-Jumel Mansion.

She would have been back in the public eye in 1833, as the new wife of former U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr—and almost immediately as one of the rare early-19th-century women to file for divorce.

And perhaps even these days when, legend has it, her specter makes an occasional appearance at the Morris-Jumel Mansion.

Starting Friday, Eliza's ghost will turn up on a regular basis as the centerpiece artwork of "Yinka Shonibare MBE: Colonial

Arrangements." Celebrating the 250th anniversary of the mansion, the exhibition, which runs through Aug. 31, also features the British-born Nigerian artist's

colorfully clad sculptural figures installed throughout the mansion.

Accounts of Eliza's spectral presence have endured for decades, said Carol S. Ward, the mansion's executive director. In the 1960s, the story goes, she appeared on the balcony and shushed a group of rambunctious schoolchildren.

"It seems like people either physically see her, or there are noises, or a presence is felt," said Ms. Ward, who noted that Eliza is never a malevolent presence. "She's just around. It's not like she's going to eat anyone's brains or anything."

Using a 21st-century version of the Victorian stage illusion known as "Pepper's ghost," Mr. Shonibare's installation conjures Jumel as a phantasmic figure, "looking like she's reaching out for you," said Ms. Ward. Reluc-



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tant to divulge technical details, she allowed only that “the effect involves a mirror.”

Presented in the main-floor parlor—where Jumel married Aaron Burr in 1833—the illusion originates in a sculptural figure of Eliza that Mr. Shonibare made for the installation. While the ghostly image appears downstairs, the figure itself is on view in Eliza’s elegant upstairs boudoir.

Like many of Mr. Shonibare’s mannequins, Eliza’s figure is headless and dressed in 19th-century clothing made from Dutch wax fabric. Widely associated with West Africa, these colorful, printed textiles are based on Indonesian batik techniques and were originally produced not in Africa, but Europe—a powerful metaphor of global interconnection.

Mr. Shonibare, who works in a wide range of mediums—painting, photography, sculpture and installation, film and performance—often uses historical themes of trade and colonialism

to explore contemporary issues of race, class and identity.

“Yinka’s art is about articulating truths that should be obvious but aren’t until you see the work,” said Karen Milbourne, the curator at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art who organized a

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2009 touring retrospective of Mr. Shonibare’s work. “Yet it’s so beautiful that you want to keep looking.”

Other works in the show depict children, also dressed in Dutch wax cloth. Upstairs, two drawn from the artist’s earlier series “Mother and Father Worked Hard So I Can Play” are shown doing typical kid stuff—executing a back flip, racing on an old-fashioned scooter—while

a third sits in demure contemplation in Eliza’s dressing room.

Created in 2009 for the period rooms of the Brooklyn Museum, the “Mother and Father Worked Hard” series was intended to link the innocent activities of children with the amassing of wealth by their parents.

“Historically, that wealth-gathering was somewhat controversial—in that wealth was acquired through the enslavement of others,” said Mr. Shonibare. “And the children are enjoying the fruits of that colonial power relationship.”

By delivering such messages through sumptuous, beautifully crafted work, Mr. Shonibare seduces viewers, inviting them to think more, said Ms. Milbourne. “He plays with history. That’s the operative word—he plays with it. And he does it with an incredible sense of humor.”

That playfulness is apparent in Mr. Shonibare’s choice of Eliza Jumel over more eminent residents—including George

Washington, who made the mansion his military headquarters in autumn 1776.

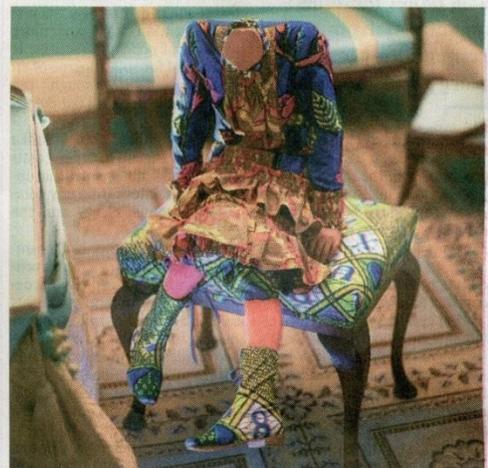
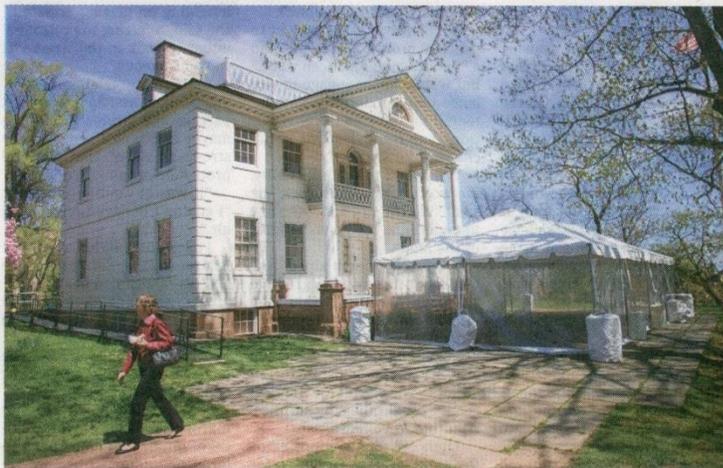
“There are myths about her,” the artist said. “It was rumored that she killed her first husband,” the French-born wine and dry-goods merchant Stephen Jumel.

Other accounts have her growing up in a brothel in Providence, R.I., and later offering safe passage to Napoleon as the deposed emperor faced exile.

As she became reclusive later in life, Mr. Shonibare said, “I know that people were frightened of her.” He said he found himself particularly interested in “the enigma of the ghost.”

“I wanted to play with the idea of people believing in ghosts,” he said. “Or the superstition in the idea of the haunted house.”

Asked what he hopes will happen in the mansion’s parlor, Mr. Shonibare laughs. “As long as I can spook people a little bit,” he said, “that would be enough.”



Art pieces, top, above and below left, for the exhibition called ‘Yinka Shonibare MBE: Colonial Arrangements,’ which opens Friday at the Morris-Jumel Mansion, above left.