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Review: Yinka Shonibare at the Barnes Foundation

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Yinka Shonibare's "Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour" (1996–1997)
(Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London)

PHILADELPHIA — Raised in Nigeria and educated at Goldsmiths alongside fellow members of the Young British Artists generation, [Yinka Shonibare](#) is known for his examinations of colonial and postcolonial exchange using colorful textiles. He presents a healthy contrast to the classically minded Barnes Foundation, where his work is the subject of its second contemporary exhibition. Albert Barnes was an advocate of education for African-Americans and also an early champion of African art, which is significantly represented in his collection. At the same time, his is the kind of legacy ripe for criticism: an interest in education that focuses on the empirical and canonical and a collection of non-Western art made possible by the colonial practices Shonibare asks his viewers to revisit.

Critique takes center stage in this show, at the Barnes Foundation through April 21. Works include selections from the last two decades of Shonibare's practice, as well as a series of sculptures commissioned by the foundation. The style throughout pokes gentle fun at the display of antiquities and historical paintings in museums like the Barnes, using figures clothed in Shonibare's wonderfully eye-catching signature Dutch wax-printed textiles. The five photographs in "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" series reference Goya's *Los*

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Caprichos in the subjects' poses. In these grandiose works, the artist dramatically stages each colorfully suited figure, rendered in chiaroscuro. *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* installation, 1996–97, is a send-up of museum period rooms, with staid furniture and polite decor; however, its surfaces are covered in wallpaper and textiles in a pattern depicting black soccer players, bringing tensions between populism, nationalism, and race into play in a stage set–like space from which viewers are removed. Despite the dark edges of Shonibare's critique, there's an exuberance to these works that makes them inviting and aesthetically enjoyable.

Still, the institution's support of such political works feels altogether too neat. While we're invited to consider Barnes's participation in colonialism (for all his philanthropic interests in the arts and education, he was, after all, a very wealthy white man who spent a lot of time encouraging people to read works by other white men), the pieces commissioned for this show are a celebration of his legacy: Child-size figures with globes for heads climb up ladders made of texts Barnes once read. Though the exhibition advocates for progressive-minded education through a collection with stated pedagogical aims, one wonders if Barnes's utopian ladder is the one we need to be climbing at this moment.

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