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Unsentimental Education Yinka Shonibare climbs the ladder at the Barnes Foundation

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Over the past two decades, the British artist Yinka Shonibare has used film, dance, installation, painting, photography, and most notably sculpture to mine the historical and political identities of his African and European roots. Raised in Lagos, Nigeria, Shonibare studied art in London where he became a key player in the Young British Artists generation for his signature deployment of stealthily positioned mannequins (some with globes for heads) costumed in African-inspired Dutch wax fabrics, subversively transforming indigenous garb into the fashions of the aristocracy.

Today, some 15 examples of those works—including a series of photos referencing Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* and the artist's seminal 2003 *Scramble for Africa* installation, which features headless mannequins gathered around an oval table—go on display as part of *Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders*, at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

"In a way I see my body of work as chapters in a book often connected to the zeitgeist or to what I'm thinking about at any one time," says Shonibare, who first showed his work in Philadelphia a decade ago, though he knew little about the Barnes Foundation until he received this commission three years ago (the Foundation's first since founder Dr. Albert C. Barnes commissioned Matisse in 1930).

Magic Ladders, features various Shonibare mannequins ascending wooden ladders on steps constructed from titles found in Barnes's own library. Barnes was hugely committed to education, explains the artist, and to making his collection accessible to ordinary people. "So the installation is based on that aspirational side of life."

Yinka Shonibare MBE: *Magic Ladders* is on view at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia through April 21.