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NEW YORK CITY





YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE, *Fake Death Picture (The Death of St Francis - Bartolomé Carducho)*, 2011, digital chromogenic print

Framed: 58 3/4 x 78" (148.91 x 198.12 cm)

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**YINKA
SHONIBARE
MBE
AND THE ART OF
RESISTANCE**

By ERNESTO MENÉNDEZ-CONDE

When the great lord passes the wise peasant bows deeply and silently farts'. Few weeks ago, while working in this review, I read this Ethiopian proverb, quoted by James Scott in his book *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990). Since then I have wondered how Yinka Shonibare MBE's work could be related to this saying. In what follows I will try to answer this question.

In *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, scholar James Scott distinguishes between what he calls 'public' and 'hidden' transcripts. Imposed by the powerful, these public transcripts aim toward a self-celebration of the dominants, as well as the moral values and relations of production that allow the perpetuation of the status quo. They also have a theatrical character. Neither the ruling classes nor their subjugated groups believe in them. Actually they both, in their respective 'hidden transcripts', usually see the other group with distrust and hostility. Nevertheless, the rituals of reverence and the adulation play a productive role in the relations of power. They allow the powerful to enact a sense of unity, presenting the oppressive regime as a timeless social order and rendering idealized images of the rulers. The oppressed, on the other hand, can

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take advantage of the public transcripts in order to introduce some subtle forms of opposition, like the wise peasant in the Ethiopian proverb does with his public reverence that contrasts with the silent act of disrespect.

In his work, British artist Yinka Shonibare seems to play the role of the subaltern. His acceptance of the public transcripts starts with the inclusion of MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) as part of his artistic name. He received this honorific distinction in 2005. It is hard to tell whether he proudly added these abbreviations to his name or if he did it as a mockery. This ambivalence prevails in his work, in which he seems to embrace the aesthetic tradition of 18th and 19th century European painting, while assuming a supposed “Africanness” as an allegory of identity, or a personal signature.

Shonibare’s images could be seen as attempts to rewrite Eurocentric historical narratives by including black and mestizo characters attending to tragic scenes taken from Western painting—such as the death of Saint-Francis or Leonardo da Vinci—or playing a main role in a well-known Italian opera. In the series of pictures shown in his recent show at James Cohan Gallery, *Addio del Passato* (So Close My Sad Story) the main character—a dying white man—wears 18th century costumes made from fabrics that suggest a sense of “Africanness.” At first glance, these are vindications of the traditionally oppressed, post-colonized world, in its undermined place in global culture, history, politics and economics. However, Shonibare seems to go beyond these types of postcolonial parodies. He also points to identity issues in themselves. I would claim that in Shonibare’s work these issues related to national identities function as parodies of public transcripts that are reminiscent of a colonized past.

As many thinkers have asserted, hegemonic cultural centers have portrayed themselves as historical bearers of universal values, while assigning a local character to traditions from post-colonized countries.¹ So, by

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YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE, *Fake Death Picture (The Suicide - Manet)*, 2011
digital chromogenic print
Framed: 58 ½ x 71 ¼" (148.59 x 180.98 cm)
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paradox, the more intellectuals from these societies engage in the quest of their respective cultural identities, the more they affirm their subaltern role. National identities are mirages, and to certain extent cages and traps. They may even obey to a “demand for authenticity”² that has affected both the ways in which intellectuals from what used to be called the ‘Third World’ see themselves, and their efforts to reach the mainstream.


Born in England to Nigerian parents, Shonibare experienced the burden of this demand for authenticity. While studying at the School of Fine Arts in London, a professor suggested that he create works related to his African background. This anecdote is just a small example of widely spread, perhaps even unconscious everyday assumptions, quite encysted in the artistic world. Artists from Asia, Africa and Latin America, are frequently expected to bring their cultural heritages to their creations. Thus, for instance, the art world assumes a Haitian painter’s work must somehow be related to voodoo practices, or an African sculptor to be inspired by ritual masks, whereas someone from the Islamic world is supposed to work with Arabic calligraphy. Their cultural roots become national allegories that they wear like traditional costumes.

Shonibare fulfilled these demands through irony, and literally speaking, disguises. He became widely known for his puzzling use of Dutch wax-printed cloth in his videos, pictures and installations. Shonibare produces deliberately histrionic scenes, which he titles “fake deaths,” in photos that could be seen as “fake paintings” (since the artist imitates the brush strokes, the textures, and pigments of oil painting). In the photographs included in his recent show, his characters—Da Vinci, Saint Francis and the British poet Thomas Chatterton— all resemble British Admiral Nelson, and Emperor Francis I of France is performed by a black man. Finally, the fabrics are fake allegories of Africanness. While the cloth he uses in his work are often referred to as “African fabrics,” their history is much more transnational and complicated than the




YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE,
Installation view of Addio del Passato
James Cohan Gallery, New York
February 16 - March 24, 2012
Photographer: Jason Mandella
©The Artist / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery,
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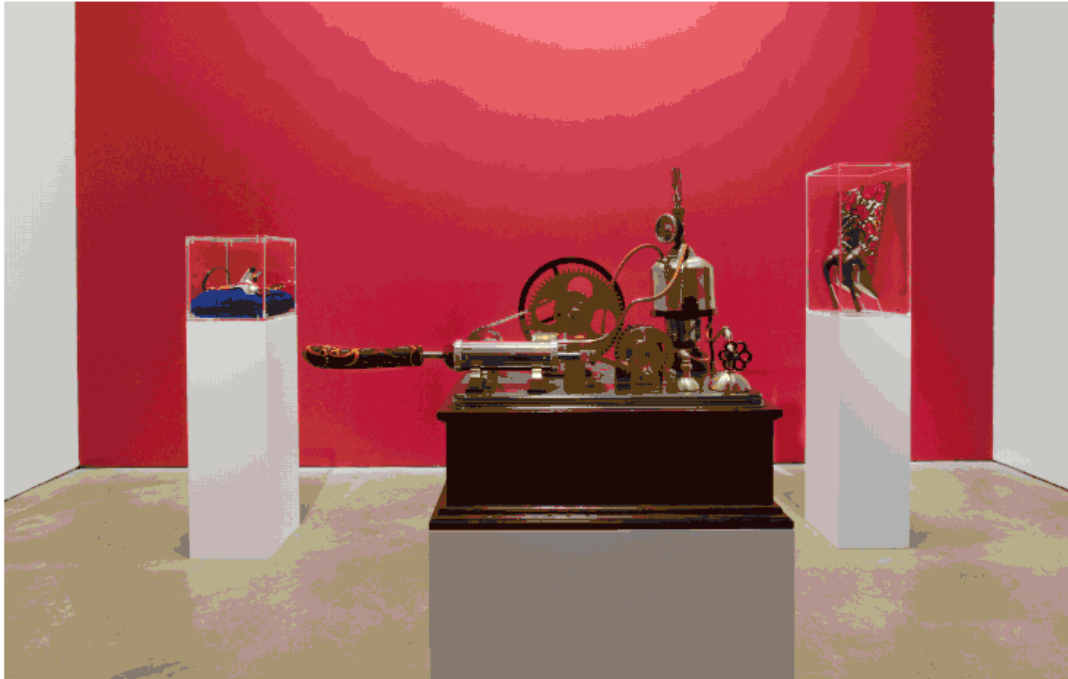


YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE,
Installation view of *Addio del Passato*
James Cohan Gallery, New York, February 16 - March 24, 2012
Digital video, Duration: 16:52
Photographer: Jason Mandella
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moniker suggests. In the mid-nineteenth century, Dutch manufacturers produced fabrics with patterns inspired by Indonesian batiks, which they exported to West Africa. Shonibare's creates a fake nationalism, which could be actually an emblem of multicultural trade.

This is not the first time Shonibare works with the historical figure of Admiral Nelson, one of the most well-known British national heroes, who fought against

Napoleon, and won the battle of Trafalgar, in which he tragically died. In 2005, Shonibare was commissioned by the Mayor of London to create a work of art that commemorates the battleship, for a plinth in Trafalgar Square. His monument was a small-scale replica of Nelson's ship, with sails made of Dutch fabrics, and encapsulated in a big bottle. For Shonibare, Admiral Nelson is a historical figure that allows him to comment about the present, multi-cultural world.



YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE, I
Installation view of *Addio del Passato*
James Cohan Gallery, New York, February 16 - March 24, 2012
Photographer: Jason Mandella
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In his video installation *Addio del Passato* (2011), Shonibare again makes ideological use of this national hero. In the video a black soprano sings this well-known aria from Verdi's *La Traviata*. She starts her performance in front of a birdcage, which seems to be an allusion to a colonial and postcolonial history. Then she wanders through an empty mansion, furnished in an 18th-century style, with a library, paintings on the wall, a fountain and a garden. The whole film set

raises a discussion on Eurocentric cultural values. A screeching sound emitting from a replica Victorian-era vibrator whose phallus, like the costume of the singer in the video, was covered with Dutch fabrics regularly disrupts Verdi's aria. The sound connects the sexually repressed machine to the elite cultural symbol of the Italian opera. Shonibare, like Freud, Benjamin or Adorno, depicts historical progress in a dialectical relation with discontent and aggression. Here Nelson



YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE, *Fake Death Picture (The Death of Chatterton - Henry Wallis)*
2011
digital chromogenic print
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takes the role of the lover in *La Traviata*, but Shonibare twists the plot of Verdi's opera. Violeta is not the only one on the brink of death—she finally collapses in a corridor—the male character succumbs as well. There are allusions to a love triangle. Shonibare's video suggests that the woman playing the role of Violeta could be Nelson's wife, Francis "Fanny" Nisbet, whom he betrayed with another woman, Lady Hamilton. The black soprano cannot be reduced to an allegory for Africanness since the real Fanny, the one she impersonates, was actually an aristocratic, white woman, who was born on a Caribbean island, and settled down in Europe.

For Shonibare, Nelson embodies the fall, or the agony, of Western Empires. This decay, this *Addio del Passato*, also takes on a carnivalesque tone. Made with Dutch fabrics, Nelson's military uniform makes him look like a clown or a fool. It is a bright, colorful dress, placed at the center of chromatic harmonies and tenebrist compositions. Shonibare embraces the image of the hero, the aesthetic Eurocentric tradition, and nationalist allegories, just to turn them into disguises, mockeries and politically ambivalent symbols. He purposely plays with fakeness as a way to deconstruct public transcripts, in order to show his nonconformities, his transgressions and display his uncanny sense of humor.

NOTES

¹In that regard, see for instance Fredric Jameson's lecture *World literature*, delivered at the Franklin Humanities Institute, Duke University, November 10, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUtV4kCznU>

²Prasad, quoted in Paolini and Anthony Elliott. (88).

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