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Yinka Shonibare: 'I don't believe in putting up borders'

Yinka Shonibare has spent three decades ransacking the western canon for inspiration. His latest commission turns on the mythical origins of the Trojan war. For "Venus Presenting Helen to Paris (with Townley Venus)" — which next week goes on show in From Life, an exhibition at London's Royal Academy — the British-Nigerian artist has taken a cast of Venus from the academy's collection, wrapped it in patterns associated with African fabrics and replaced its head with a globe. As part of the exhibition, the statue will appear in a virtual reality garden based on a Scottish neoclassical painting.

"[The globe] represents the world as opposed to this Eurocentric approach," Shonibare explains, as we circle the cast in his workshop. But there is no need for him to be so explicit: globe heads are an ingrained part of the artist's lexicon, established over almost three decades, as are the African patterns and neoclassical imagery of this complex new work. When I comment on the familiarity, Shonibare says he's happy to have a well-branded identity. "It's sort of like creating your own Esperanto," he says, slow and relaxed. "We certainly wouldn't be concerned whether Rembrandt was still using oil paints or not."

I am meeting Shonibare at his canal-side studio in east London. Downstairs is a large workshop where the colourful Venus stands, awaiting her debut. Upstairs is a blazingly hot studio where the artist and his assistants work. A lift shaft connects the two: Shonibare, 55, uses a wheelchair because a spinal virus, contracted at the age of 18, means that he is part-paralysed.

As we ascend, workshop to studio, I consider the fact that Shonibare's interest in Trojan mythology is probably no coincidence. He has often described himself as a Trojan horse of sorts: a radical artist just square enough to gain entry to powerful institutions. Shonibare makes work about race, class and colonialism that will provoke (but stop short of humiliating) its patrons.

This has been a conscious choice, Shonibare tells me once we are seated. Born in Britain, then raised in Nigeria, he was an art student at London's Goldsmiths College in the late 1980s, and was keenly aware that the most politically outspoken artists of the decade were being ignored by mainstream critics. "The black art movement seemed to be perennially marginalised," he says. "I wanted to avoid work that would make people feel defensive rather than wanting to engage with it."

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A springboard was provided by Charles Saatchi, who anointed Shonibare one of his chosen ones by including him in 1997's seminal academy show Sensation. In an exhibition that traded on shock, Shonibare's "How Does a Girl Like You Get to be a Girl Like You?" was a demure outlier: three opulent mannequins wearing 19th-century gowns made of "African" wax fabrics. The work introduced the public to the artist's interest in cross-cultural identity and to his trademark approach of mixing so-called African fabrics with scenarios from the western canon. This is a more complex trick than it appears at first glance. Shonibare likes using wax fabric because it has a messy cultural lineage: despite being typically associated with sub-Saharan Africa, it originates from Indonesia and is most often manufactured in the Netherlands. The message: "Metaphorically speaking, I don't believe in putting up borders."

Nuanced exploration of global identity has proved a rich vein and Shonibare has received challenging commissions. In 2007 London's National Gallery invited him to make work about the slave owners depicted in the gallery's collection, and in 2014 he became the first artist since Matisse to collaborate with the Barnes Foundation, shortly after the body's controversial move to downtown Philadelphia. He has become a popular choice for public art projects, beginning with his 2010 commission for the fourth plinth on Trafalgar Square, "Nelson's Ship in a Bottle".

To some detractors, the work is facile. When Shonibare was nominated for the 2004 Turner Prize, the London Evening Standard's art critic reached for the top-drawer insult that some of the work was "intellectually feeble-minded" — the insinuation being that to dress Victorian mannequins in the clothes of the people they brutally colonised was the sort of one-note cultural commentary that appeals to teenagers who think putting Mickey Mouse ears on pictures of Che Guevara is the height of political satire.

But this is itself an unsubtle reading, because the dance Shonibare does with his totems of empire is much subtler — a push-and-pull relationship of attraction as well as repulsion. He grew up wealthy and privately educated, and says it was a surprise to learn at art school that he was presumed to be an angry young man by virtue of being black. "I had a chauffeur taking me to school," he remarks laconically.

When Shonibare was awarded an MBE in 2005, he affixed the title to his name, a move he sometimes describes as subversive and sometimes as sincere flattery. "I certainly don't pretend

there's some virtue on my side," he says. "What I'm saying is that colonialism might be a bad idea, and excess might be a bad idea, but my own personal failings might mean that I desire some of the trappings of the colonial era . . . That immediately makes it a more complicated proposition."

So if Shonibare's reimaginings of paintings by Fragonard, Hogarth or Gainsborough strike the viewer as gorgeously seductive, it is because the artist is himself in part seduced. Above all, he is an unapologetic aesthete: "What I would hate is for people to say, 'His politics is really good but his art is rubbish.'"

Despite two decades plus of personal success, Shonibare thinks his priorities — "nuance and complexity" — are as unfashionable now as they were in the 1980s. "I think people have reverted to a black-and-white position of looking at the world," he says. Unsurprisingly, given the cross-cultural entanglements that he seeks to highlight with his use of Dutch wax fabrics, he has no truck with contemporary concern over cultural appropriation. "I'm baffled by it completely," he says.

This portrayal runs the risk of casting Shonibare as a reactionary, which he is not. He is an active mentor of young artists, most recently as ambassador for the WOOSE [Wysing, Outpost and Open School East] Network — a scheme set up to provide time, money and space to early-career artists. He also lets artists use the bottom floor of his building for residencies, free of charge. And while he has retained certain stylistic signatures since his Sensation debut, his work is evolving in form with every new commission — photography, film, dance, opera, now virtual reality. Shonibare says he has taken to this latest technique: "It's another kind of deconstruct-ive approach."

On the wall behind where Shonibare is sitting, his MBE certificate hangs next to one from the Royal Academy anointing him an academician. It strikes me as entirely logical that he is returning, once again, to the academy for his latest commission: it's an emphatically pro-establishment institution rendered improbably egalitarian by its emphasis on open submissions. Isn't that just the sort of contradiction he likes to play with? "Absolutely," Shonibare says — and it would not be journalistic license to describe him as having a glint in his eye. "There's a kind of flirtation with the notion of the establishment, but actually it's a place full of artists and mavericks."