

Yinka Shonibare: Message In A Bottle  
Billionaire  
15 February 2013  
Hester Lacey

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***After wowing critics and public alike with his 'Nelson's Ship in a Bottle' in Trafalgar Square, London, Yinka Shonibare, MBE is determined to fulfil the artistic maxim that "everything is possible".***



1. Yinka Shonibare, MBE works across a multitude of creative platforms — from painting to photography, sculpture to film. "I get bored very easy," says the artist. "It's fun to try different things."

Yinka Shonibare is no stranger to creating public art that resonates with a wide audience. He was invited to produce a piece for perhaps the most-prominent art platform in the UK: the fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. 'Nelson's Ship in a Bottle', displayed on the plinth from May 2010 to January 2012, described by critics in terms such as "joyful and enchanting", proved so popular that it was purchased via an appeal led by the Art Fund that

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raised more than £250,000 in contributions from the public. It is now on permanent display outside the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London.

'Nelson's Ship in a Bottle', a replica of HMS *Victory*, is minutely detailed, down to the 37 hand-stitched canvas sails and the 80 tiny cannon. The latest public works by Yinka Shonibare, MBE (he was created MBE in 2004 and has adopted the title into his working name), echo the maritime theme but on a rather different scale. His fibreglass 'Wind Sculptures' stand more than 6m tall and, in the form of a ship's sail, explore the concept of harnessing movement and capturing the action of the wind, making the solid appear almost fluid. Two will go on display at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) in March and a third will be sited outside the redeveloped Howick Place building in London's Victoria from this spring.



2. A sculpture by Yinka Shonibare, MBE titled 'Cannon Ball Heaven'.

Shonibare likens the process of creating 'Wind Sculptures' to that that an architect would use. "If you're an architect, you're not going to single-handedly put all the bricks on, you're going to rely on a team of engineers," he says. "We started by blowing wind into fabric, seeing how it behaved, photographing it and creating a maquette from that." Large-scale pieces, he says,

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rely on making sure the smaller model is entirely accurate; the biggest technical challenge of 'Wind Sculptures' was calculating the depth of the curves. "The fibreglass is poured into a mould and if the curves are too deep, it's difficult to take out. So there are compromises you have to make just because of technical issues: not too many, but you have to try doing things in a slightly different way," he explains.

The 'Wind Sculptures' at YSP are part of a major exhibition that includes more than 30 works, many of which have never been displayed in the UK before. Another highlight is 'Revolution Kids', sculptures created using taxidermy. A fox-headed revolutionary, decked out in a bright print shirt, brandishes a gun and a BlackBerry: the weapons of choice for a younger generation of revolutionaries. The work was conceived during the 2011 London riots and the Arab Spring. "I wanted to express something about the revolution in the Arab world," says Shonibare. "I was looking at the idea of rebellion generally — and revolution. I guess the ideal revolution changes something; they are morphing into other forms. The fox is quite cheeky and seemed like a good animal to use. He's carrying a replica of Gaddafi's golden gun, the kind of thing a cheeky fox might do. He's wearing colourful clothes. He's very handsome too; he might be a star of the show."

Shonibare was brought up in Lagos and studied art in London, at Byam Shaw College of Art (now part of Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design) and then at Goldsmiths College, where he gained his Master of Fine Arts degree, graduating as one of the Young British Artists (YBAs). "I have a multiplicity of experiences and those hybrid experiences formed the basis of my work," he says. "London is a city where you've got the freedom to explore anything and everything — that's what creates the work, the sense that everything is possible." He has developed into an extraordinary range of media, from painting and sculpture to collage, photography, film and performance, frequently featuring his trademark wax batik fabric (used, for example, to create the colourful sails of the *Victory* replica). "I get bored very easily," he laughs. "It's fun to try different things. They seem very different but it's just the media that are different. The issues and sensibilities are the same across all of them."

Colonialism, post-colonialism and globalism are the underlying themes of works created using the collaborative approach used to great effect in 'Wind Sculptures'. "Because of my

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interests, I want to produce a lot of different things and sometimes my imagination can go beyond the skills I have,” he explains. “To realise everything I would like to realise I would have to go to acting school, become an engineer, become a photographer, a builder. It would take me 100 years and, rather than limiting my imagination, I do better to work with people who have the skills, such as a film director.”

It’s impossible to predict, he says, what we’ll see from him next. “For the ship in a bottle, I had no thoughts before I was invited to put a piece in Trafalgar Square. It’ll always be like that; very much dependent on what I get involved in. My work is often inspired by what’s going on at a particular time in history and I don’t know what’s going to be happening tomorrow.”