

The Guardian G2
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Yorkshire Sculpture Park, normally a haven of tranquillity, has been invaded by armed foxes and headless gunmen. **Jonathan Jones** is mesmerised by the hilarious world of Yinka Shonibare



Yorkshire Sculpture Park is famed for its eloquent championing of local heroes Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth - and for its sheepfolds. Rebuilt or refashioned in colourful stone by Andy Goldsworthy, these delicate pens pepper the hillsides. But wander YSP's 500 acres, which today are crisp with frost, and you will soon find a walled hollow where deer were once taken for slaughter. Such discoveries provide an eerie echo of a very different time: the early 19th century, when this artificial landscape of rolling hills and silvery waters was created as the pleasure ground of a wealthy landed family.

I may as well be honest: I find the park a bit worthy. I think Moore and Hepworth are ever so slightly, well,

Lethal weapons ... (clockwise from main) Egg Fight; a hankie-like wind sculpture; and Revolution Kid (Fox)



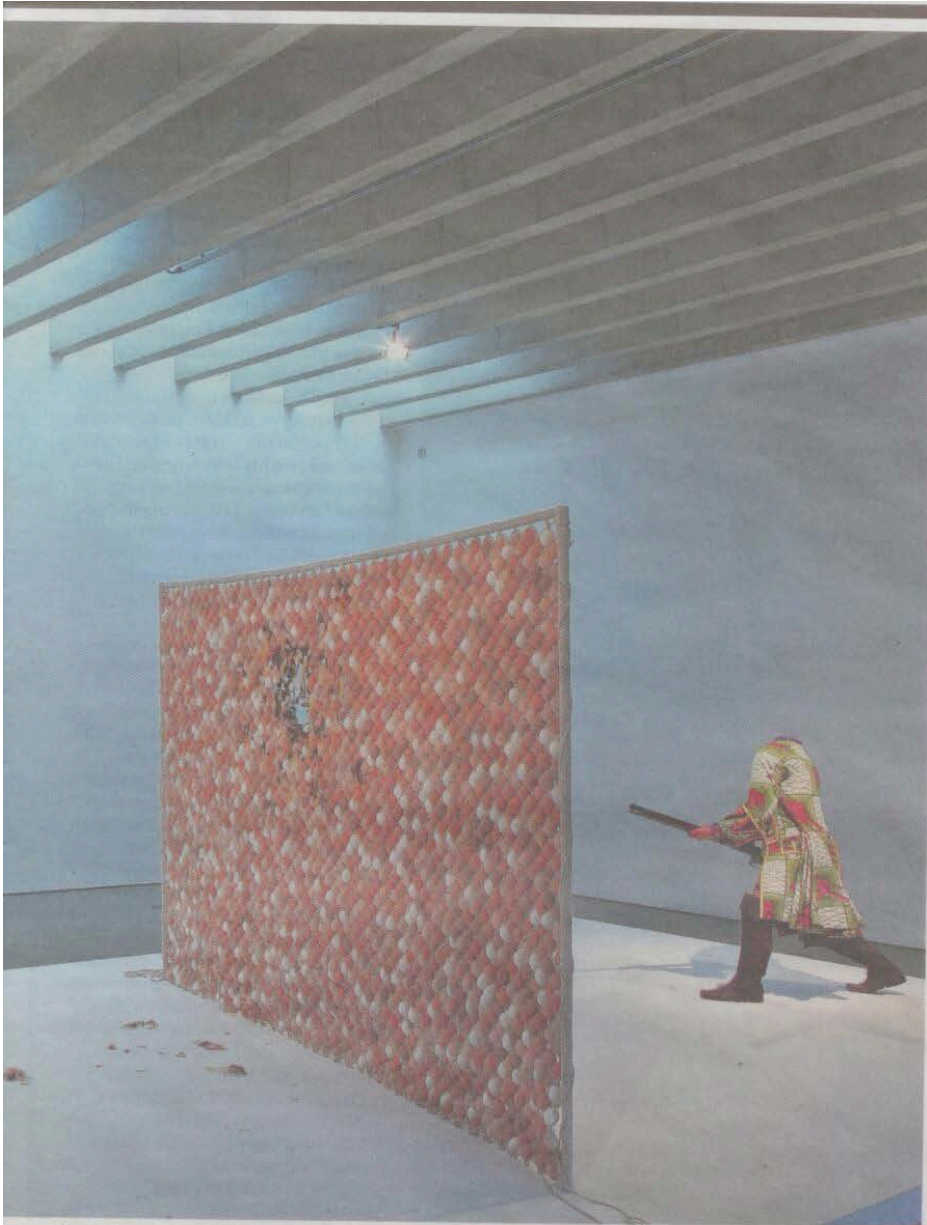
dull; and for all its bright, bold visitor centre, this place is just too much a temple of cultural reverence for my taste. But Yinka Shonibare has set it alight. The YSP, it turns out, is the perfect stage for this British-Nigerian artist who is fascinated by the strange legacies of Britain's imperial past, when such vast estates were built on the backs of slaves and the plundering of the colonies.

In this spectacular exhibition, his largest yet, Shonibare's art has never looked as serious, acute and sustained as it does when let loose among the planted cedars and firs of landscaped England. At the top of one hill, there's an enormous, flamboyantly patterned sculpture of a hankie that could have fluttered out of a giant dandy's pocket. Blazing with colour and frozen in mid-furl, it stands like

a banner of defiance against the grey skies. Another hankie (he calls them wind sculptures) can be seen further down the manicured slopes, towards the woods. Both recall Shonibare's 1998 series of staged photographs, *The Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, in which various suitably attired characters struck theatrical poses, as if starring in a rather over-the-top costume drama set in an old pile. Fabric-ation, as this show of new and recent work is called, feels similarly ironic and powerfully dramatic.

Indoors, beneath the beamed ceilings of the YSP's galleries, are the Revolution Kids: animal-headed humans who dance madly, toting golden pistols that replicate the one Colonel Gaddafi owned. Shonibare's first attempt at taxidermy, these insurrectionists are meant to be about

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the Arab Spring. But, overlooking a half-tame, half-wild English landscape where gentlefolk once rode to hounds, the armed foxes look like they're here for revenge.

Shonibare, who was born in London but moved to Lagos when he was three before returning in time for his A-levels, doesn't just dress history up in glad rags: he takes it on a wild dance and spatters it with raw eggs. He uses Dutch waxed fabrics to clad his mannequins, each one patterned in some crazy new design purchased readymade from the Netherlands, since he sees in their wacky hues a distilled history of imperialism. These vibrant patterns - which also provide the sails for his ships, most notably the re-creation of Nelson's flagship HMS Victory that stood on Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth - look

**The foxes
 look like
 they're
 here to take
 revenge
 on people
 who rode to
 hounds**



Critic's notebook

A violent dislike of *The Good Life* is no bad thing

Brian Logan

When Richard Briers died recently, loud was the lamenting over his bygone era of innocent, fun-for-all-the-family comedy. Alongside a well-merited outpouring of affection for the actor himself, message boards heaved with praise for his signature sitcom, *The Good Life*, about a couple who garden their way out of the rat race ("a great programme"; "exceptional TV"). Reading all that, I grieved not for the cosy comedies of yesteryear - but for the insurrection that failed, ultimately, to overthrow them.

For comedy-watchers of my vintage, *The Good Life* was notable chiefly for one thing only: it was the icon of bourgeois entertainment that, in 1983, was ripped to shreds by Vyvyan the punk in *The Young Ones*, the anarchic student sitcom that first pitched Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall and co into the nation's living rooms. And I mean that literally. In a rather good special effect for the era, Vyvyan tore the title sequence apart with his bare hands, shrieking: "It's so bloody nice! Felicity 'Treacle' Kendal and Richard 'Sugar-Flavoured Snot' Briers! They're nothing but a couple of reactionary stereotypes, confirming the myth that everyone in Britain is a lovable middle-class eccentric. And I hate them!"

Now, I'm not saying *The Good Life* entirely deserved the flak, but those of us reared on Vyvyan's violent dislike of the show feel somewhat queasy to see it being suddenly so revered. *The Spectator* promptly ran a piece headlined: "Richard Briers, Thatcherite Hero". It hymned the "conservative" subtext of *The Good Life* and dismissed *The Young Ones* as "terribly dated".

Lots of people call *The Young Ones* dated - usually those keen to head off any suggestion that TV comedy can ever be confrontational, subversive and limitlessly creative. *The Young Ones* was often all of these things. And I suspect it's less dated than *The Good Life* - which I dare say could as easily be claimed by the left as the right. As Briers once told me: "I've never voted for the Tory party in my life." But nostalgia for 1970s sitcoms makes me want to drive studs into my forehead and scream about sugar-flavoured snot.

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« African because they are worn and used in Africa. But, since the 1800s, they have been made in the Netherlands (and Manchester, actually) then shipped abroad. His mockery of myths about Africa continues in his pseudo-primitivist paintings studded with nails that resemble the rusty ones found in "fetish" sculptures from the Congo region. Yet his are painted lime green and bright blue, exorcising their spookiness. Or are the garish colours a disguise? Are there hidden powers concealed in these nails after all?

In his hilarious, unsettling installation *Egg Fight*, two headless mannequins dressed as 18th-century gentlemen stand on opposing sides of a screen made of eggs, locked in a surreal yet deadly game. Both have long-barrelled guns that they fire through the eggs at each other, leaving charred fragments of shell lying around. It is like a 3D cartoon by Goya, ringing with the mad quality of the Spanish visionary's *Caprices*, his surreal send-ups of stupidity and superstition.

T here are more headless mannequins elsewhere. Two are firing Dutch-print cannonballs out of a replica cannon from - a recurring motif - *HMS Victory*. (Again, there is an air of Goya here, given the deranged futility underlying the Spaniard's depictions of war.) Just in case you don't get it, this work comes with a pat official interpretation that Nelson's naval victories paved the way for colonialism, and so are part of Shonibare's comment on the legacy of empire. Similar texts are all over this exhibition, dutifully explaining every last fox-headed kid as an allegory of race and empire. But if Shonibare's art was as simple as that, it would just be, well, I want to say Banksy. It would be banal agitprop. In fact, it is poetic,



Exquisitely dressed ... (above) *Waster*; (top right) *Shonibare*

funny and somehow - beneath all the humour - profound.

Shonibare doesn't hate the 18th- and early 19th-century world his art haunts. He loves it. He loves the clothes, anyway. His mannequins are exquisitely turned out, gaudily playful in their precise recreation of the line of a Regency dandy's trousers, the narrow waist of a rococo rake's coat. This exhibition is a masterclass in the history of fashion. In a new film showing in an old chapel in the park, Shonibare lets his lens linger on the bosom of a singer wearing an 18th-century-style frock he has made. She is belting out an aria: *Addio del Passato*, from Verdi's *La Traviata*. Heartfelt and tragic, this musical farewell to life is hardly the stuff of instant and easy political messages.

In fact, this show is full of images of death and spiritual transcendence. Nelson is not just a colonial bad guy in Shonibare's series of posed photographs called *Fake Deaths*, but also a pale-faced clown trying out different ways of dying as he re-enacts scenarios found in famous paintings: by poison in Henry Wallis's *The Death of Chatterton*; by gun in Manet's *The Suicide*.

Meanwhile, fabric aliens are trying to take off in flying machines that are as nutty as anything Leonardo da Vinci ever dreamed up. And dandified child mannequins are trying on wings, too - angel wings that attach with leather straps, just like the ones street kids were given to wear whenever Caravaggio needed models for his paintings of angels. So Shonibare's faceless urchins will be able to fly where the slave owners and the fox hunters will never catch them.

These Wildean works are worth a thousand Henry Moores.

i Yinka Shonibare: *Fabric-ation* is at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, until 1 September. Details: ysp.co.uk

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