

The Independent  
In The Studio: Yinka Shonibare, artist  
23 June 2012  
Karen Wright

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**'Art is really about life, and about challenging the establishment...'**



Yinka Shonibare's Nelson's Ship in a Bottle has arguably been the most popular Trafalgar Square Fourth Plinth project. When the display ended, a successful Art Fund campaign secured the work for permanent display at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

Shonibare, 50, claims that it touched a nerve with the public by being "both provocative and enchanting". The mystery of its manufacture appeals to some; for others, it is the message behind the model. The sails, made in vibrant African fabrics, indicate that this is no mere homage to Admiral Nelson.

## STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY

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Shonibare's studio, on a trendy stretch of the Regent's Canal near London Fields, perches atop a project space he has created for young artists. He describes the market-driven gallery system as increasingly hard on young artists, and has used his own success to open a space to "allow new voices" and show more experimental work.

The son of a lawyer, Shonibare was born in London, but moved with his family to Lagos when he was three. He returned to England for A-levels and later art school, where he contracted a virus that attacked his spine. Though disabled, Shonibare has a diligent studio practice, making work with a dedicated team of young women. He thinks of his studio as an "intelligence centre" for collaboration. I ask who shops for the distinctive toys in an ongoing series of works, and one assistant confesses that she buys them on eBay.

Shonibare's father, he says, did not want him to be an artist, but he persevered. "I did it for love. I couldn't have chosen anything else." He held part-time jobs until a £30,000 award from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation enabled him to pursue his work full-time. A Turner Prize nomination in 2004 brought him to the attention of a wider public.

Shonibare shows me images of his latest public work, which this week went on display outside the Royal Opera House: a life-sized ballerina figure, based on Margot Fonteyn, enclosed by a glass globe that will spin during performances. The head is replaced by a globe in reference to the universality of dance, her clothing by African outfits in regal shades of purple and black. I ask Shonibare, a gentle man with a glint in his eye, if he likes dance, and he says he goes often.

"Art is really about life and it's about politics and it's about actually challenging the establishment," he insists. "If you are going to create a better world, you want to change things. You can use your art to make people see things differently."