

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum

Yinka Shonibare MBE: Talks about Wind Sculpture (SG) I, His Forthcoming Project With The Public Art Fund in New York

Jeffrey Kastner

March 2018

YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

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Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Wind Sculpture (SG) I* (detail), 2018, acrylic on fiberglass resin cast, 22' 11 1/2" × 8' 10 1/4" × 5' 6 7/8" Photo: Jonathan Bassett.

IN A 2005 INTERVIEW, British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE reflected on the questions around the fluid nature of identity—racial, national, cultural—that dominate his practice. “What I do is create a kind of mongrel,” he said. “In reality most people’s cultures have evolved out of this mongrelization, but people don’t acknowledge that.” The word may initially seem an inapt one for Shonibare’s sumptuous, baroquely elegant sculptures, videos, and installations, but it does conjure the fraught conditions of postcolonial identity, increasingly defined by discourses of globalization, that have long been the primary focus of his slyly provocative work. Shonibare’s interest in hybridity is in fact written into his very name: After being decorated as a “Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire” in 2005, the artist—who was born in London, grew up in his family’s

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native Nigeria, and then returned to the UK to attend art school—officially appended the honorific to his professional name, a wry acknowledgment of his own state of perpetual betweenness.



Yinka Shonibare MBE, Butterfly Kid (Boy), 2015, Dutch-wax cotton, silk, metal, globe, leather, steel, fiberglass mannequin, 50 × 29 1/2 × 34 5/8".

Shonibare is perhaps best known for sculptures featuring headless mannequins dressed in Victorian frippery made out of African-style textiles, works that

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appropriate and detourn tropes from Western cultural history in order to consider the deep, and deeply troubled, economic and social relationships between Europe and Africa across the centuries. Though he has shown widely since the early 1990s—he earned his MFA at Goldsmiths College in London, studying alongside a generation of artists who came to be known as the Young British Artists—he did not produce his first public-art project, for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, until 2010. This month sees the installation of one of a new series of public works, his Wind Sculpture (SG) I, at the Doris C. Freedman Plaza in New York’s Central Park. Standing more than twenty feet tall, the work—a kind of free-form sail, bearing one of his signature batik-inspired designs, which seems to twist in the breeze—is in many ways classic Shonibare. Working against the grain of the stale heroism that marks so many public sculptures, a conscious strategy in a time when the amnesiac triumphalism of civic statuary has rightly come under critical scrutiny, Shonibare has recast the familiar figure of the monument in a different, properly indeterminate sort of finery: one that evokes unseen forces and effects, and that speaks to passages, both voluntary and coerced, between distant places.

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Yinka Shonibare MBE, Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, 2010, fiberglass, steel, brass, resin, UV ink on Dutch-wax cotton, linen, acrylic, wood. Installation view, Trafalgar Square, London, 2011. Photo:

Givingnot/Flickr.

MY FIRST PUBLIC SCULPTURE was Nelson's Ship in a Bottle in Trafalgar Square in 2010. Prior to that, I'd been using "African" textiles in my work for quite some time. They're known as batik or "Dutch wax" fabrics: Indonesian-influenced textiles that the Dutch produced and tried to sell back to Indonesia. But the Indonesians didn't like the Dutch factory-produced fabrics as much as the native ones, so the Dutch began selling them in Africa. During the time of the African independence struggles in the 1950s and '60s, people didn't want to wear what would be perceived as Western clothes, and

batik fabrics were adopted as a sort of national dress. But the irony, of course, is that the fabrics themselves are not indigenously African.

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View of Yinka Shonibare MBE's Wind Sculpture (SG) I, 2018, fabrication studio, London, 2017. Photo: Jonathan Bassett.

In the late '80s I was studying art in London and making very political work about what was going on in the Soviet Union—about perestroika. And one of my tutors said, “You’re of African origin. Why aren’t you producing authentic African art?” As somebody who grew up between Lagos and London, both big, busy cities, I couldn’t quite understand what that meant. What exactly was authentic African art? I was of course familiar with the fabrics from my childhood, but I saw them again in Brixton Market, and the people there explained their background to me. It was exciting to find a material that had this ability to be Dutch, to be Indonesian, to be African. I was fascinated by that. It was a time when a lot of artists, including me, were beginning to ask questions about identity. I was very influenced by French Continental theory, reading about semiotics, reading about the politics of representation, reading Derrida. I liked that this hybrid material seemed to be a metaphor for contemporary identity. And so, over the years, these fabrics have become a kind of personal language for me.

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Yinka Shonibare MBE, Wind Sculpture VII, 2016, acrylic and gold leaf on fiberglass resin cast, steel.
Installation view, Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC.

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The piece for the Fourth Plinth was, on one level, about the Battle of Trafalgar. If Napoleon had won, I probably would be speaking French to you now; in a way, I owe my presence in London to Nelson's victory. But, of course, the sails—which are made using my batik textiles—also more generally evoke a trans-atlantic migration, such as the African diaspora. The “Wind Sculptures” were inspired by those sails. I was also thinking about Pop—Claes Oldenburg for example—and I found it compelling to try to sculpt nothing, as it were—to sculpt the impression of wind. I started out blowing a hair dryer onto fabric and photographing the effect, trying to understand how wind behaves when it hits something. The works initially were going to be sculpted out of wood, but because they needed to be durable in all weather, it turned out to be better to use fiberglass. When I make costumes with the Dutch-wax fabric I use existing material, but for the “Wind Sculptures” I made my own designs—some of them are takes on actual commercial patterns and some are complete inventions. The work for the Public Art Fund is the second generation of these. The first were roughly twenty feet tall and the new ones are around twenty-three, and the new form is more complex because I used 3-D printing for the maquettes, so I was able to look at the shape from all angles.



Yinka Shonibare MBE, Cheeky Little Astronomer, 2013, Dutch-wax cotton, telescope, chair, globe, leather, fiberglass mannequin, 48 3/8 × 18 1/2 × 35 3/8".

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I think it's very powerful to have the opportunity to do public sculpture. You can engage people in so many different ways. It challenges this idea of art as an elite institution. Public art is available to everybody, and politically it's something I'm very much in sync with. But public art is challenging precisely because you are having a conversation with people at all levels of society. And showing works like these in the United States is also interesting. I was born in London, but I lived in Nigeria when I was young and then returned to London later. If I hadn't been a migrant myself, I don't think I would be making this work. Obviously, the experience of migration is central to the identity of the United States, even if it is, at present, a very thorny question in American and European political discourse.



Yinka Shonibare, Wind Sculpture II, 2013, acrylic on fiberglass resin cast, steel. Installation view, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, UK.

Like my commission for Trafalgar Square, these works are meant to be quite different from conventional monuments. I've obviously been thinking a lot about monuments recently, in regard to debates over whether particular ones should be taken down. It's a very complex issue, but I personally don't think we should be

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removing monuments. We should be erecting alternative ones that better reflect our times. I don't know that one can necessarily undo history by destroying it.



Preliminary models for Yinka Shonibare MBE's Wind Sculpture (SG) I, 2018.