

The Financial Times
The Inventory: Yinka Shonibare
8 July 2016
Hester Lacey

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Yinka Shonibare MBE, 53, is a painter, sculptor, photographer, film-maker and performance artist. In 2010, his “Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle” was displayed on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square. He was elected to the Royal Academy of Arts in 2013.

What was your childhood or earliest ambition?

To be an artist. I lived in Lagos, Nigeria, as a child and I loved looking at art. It was a much more optimistic period so the arts were quite prominent. I used to do art workshops at a local museum.

Public school or state school? University or straight into work?

Fee-paying schools in Nigeria and the UK. Byam Shaw College of Art, now part of Central Saint Martins, then Goldsmiths, University of London.

Who was or still is your mentor?

Being an artist is very difficult; being a commercially viable one is incredibly difficult. Meeting Stephen Friedman changed me from a struggling artist to an artist who can

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continually make work. I've been at Stephen's gallery for 20 years now.

How physically fit are you?

I exercise every day. I have a physical disability, so I think I am reasonably fit, given the situation.

Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?

I think it's a bit of both. If you have talent without ambition, that's no good, and ambition with no talent is no good either.

Have you ever taken an IQ test?

No, I haven't.

How politically committed are you?

Highly. But I believe in social action as opposed to party political action.

Do you consider your carbon footprint?

I do think about it but for a contemporary artist who wants to have a career, a lot of it is international, so you do find yourself travelling a lot.

Do you have more than one home?

Just one.

What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?

A home in Lagos, Nigeria, where I can do international art residencies. I want to make that cultural exchange. I'm working on it.

What's your biggest extravagance?

Beautiful art books. Or just any kind of picture books. But that relates to my profession so I don't know if it's an extravagance.

In what place are you happiest?

By the Atlantic Ocean, looking at the waves.

What ambitions do you still have?

My real ambition is to find ways of fostering more friendly knowledge about other cultures. I would like to play a role in that, because of the crazy global conflicts going on. I'd like to be in a position where I can do something practical about it.

What drives you on?

To put it simply: creating beauty in the world.

What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?

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Not dying when I was desperately ill at the age of 19.

What has been your greatest disappointment?

My nature is that every disappointment should be an opportunity. Early in my career, I really wanted to be picked to do the British Art Show — some of my peers were picked and I was not. This was very disappointing at the time.

If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?

Well done. You've achieved what you set out to achieve, and more.

If you lost everything tomorrow, what would you do?

Pick myself up and start over.

Do you believe in assisted suicide?

Absolutely, 100 per cent.

Do you believe in an afterlife?

No.

If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?

Nine.