

STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY

The New Yorker
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Shonibare's acrobatic mannequin, "Boy Doing Headstand," 2009, is a high point of the exhibition at the Mansion. Credit Photograph by Trish Mayo / Courtesy Morris-Jumel Mansion.

The really wonderful moment in the Yinka Shonibare exhibit at the Morris-Jumel Mansion, in Washington Heights—open for one last summer weekend—comes in a room upstairs: the life-size sculpture of a young boy is at play at the foot of the desk of George Washington, in strategic position on a high point, geographically speaking, of Manhattan. It is a little bit of a hike to get to the museum, up the hill from the A-train stop at 163rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue. In fact, just arriving at Morris-Jumel feels like an adventure: you see the green field up ahead of you as you come up through a lovely side street of wooden row houses, Sylvan Terrace. The row houses on the secret-seeming street were all built in 1882, for civil servants and laborers, the construction typical of the small, modest but elegant houses that were common in Manhattan at the turn of the Nineteenth Century. If you approach on Thursdays or Sundays, you might see

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arms raised towards the sun, since on those days there is free yoga on the mansion's lawn.

It's not clear which would be more startling to President Washington, the yoga class—he was a knock-'em-dead dancer, after all—or the boy in the room that was his study. The boy is bent over backwards, upside down—maybe in the midst of a tumble. The Shonibare sculpture is entitled “Boy Doing Headstand,” and the fibreglass mannequin, clothed in Shonibare's trademark Dutch-wax-printed cotton, was first exhibited in 2009. Its head, as is often the case in many of Shonibare's sculptures, is not there, making the headstand complicated, or at the very least raising questions. This being the root of what is so wonderful about the boy in Washington's room: the questions it raises.

But first, a few things about Yinka Shonibare, M.B.E. (He officially added M.B.E. to his name in 2004, when he was awarded the decoration of Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.) He was born in London, but moved to Lagos, Nigeria, when he was three. He moved back to London for art school, where, he has noted in interviews, he was encouraged to create what his teacher, who did not grow up in Lagos, referred to as “African” art. The disconnect—on the teacher's part, perhaps, but also in the culture at large—started Shonibare on a body of work that questions race and class, as well as identity in general, all in the convoluted conversations about culture and nationalism that occur in between Africa and Europe. The artist refers to himself a “‘post-colonial’ hybrid.”

His work is also technically hybrid, in that Shonibare uses many media. In 1998, his photographs were made into a series of posters in the London Underground in which he himself starred as a Victorian dandy. He directed several gorgeous films of ballerinas in masks, a haunting dance of eighteen-century colonizers dressed in his Dutch fabric. When visiting the Tate, viewers of a piece entitled “The Swing (after Fragonard),” get to take Fragonard's voyeurism to the 3-D level (spoiler alert: her knickers are postcolonial). His public art pieces include a ship in a bottle that sat on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, in 2010, and the wind sculptures that were in Chicago, at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art's downtown plaza, last year. Aside from

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spanning many media, his work is also joyous, a feat given how trenchant it is as a social and political commentary. There's color, wit, and, as the boy at Morris-Jumel demonstrates, an over-all bodily exuberance, as in a dance, though the bodies are in fact non-bodies—i.e., mannequins. In a sense, Shonibare celebrates the transnational body: a color that is not quite white, maybe not quite non-white. In his show at the James Cohan Gallery, earlier this year, Apollo, Zeus, and Poseidon were ballerinas, globe-headed and enraged in the center galleries, while a horrifyingly quaint Victorian astronaut-like human made his way through some kind of devastation in the front room, a disconcertingly luxurious meditation on ecological devastation.

Shonibare himself was at the Cohan opening, a rare New York City sighting. He lives in London's East End, where a street-level room serves also as an exhibition space (each month a different artist). While in New York City, he went up to Harlem for the opening at the Morris-Jumel Mansion, where he chatted with guests who were asking a lot about the ghost. The ghost was his installation piece, created for the Mansion; the rest of the pieces are on loan from the Cohan gallery, placed throughout the historic home—part of an excellent trend in the city and elsewhere, in which artists are offered a chance to play in old places, a win for everyone.

And the ghost people were asking about was the ghost of Eliza Jumel, one-time grand dame of the Morris-Jumel Mansion, a resident for half a century (and, if you believe in ghosts, still today) in what is today the oldest house in Manhattan. She is a consideration of colonial entanglements herself, as well as romantic and political entanglements. She was for a time married to Aaron Burr—*after* he killed Alexander Hamilton—and, early in her life, a hanger-on at the French court, a period in her life that she played to the hilt, apparently. From a piece in the *Times*, at her death, in 1865:

Madam JUMEL, whose death is chronicled above, was a very singular person, about whose name twined many marvelous stories, and with whose history the greatest men of colonial and Revolutionary days were intimately connected. According to one historian, she was born of an English, mother, Mrs. CAPET, in the cabin of a French frigate, which in the

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year of our Lord 1769 was carrying troops to the West Indies from La Brest. The mother died as the child drew the first breath of life. Somewhat embarrassed by the tender charge, the Captain concluded to keep her, but afterward, when driven into Newport, R.I., harbor, he placed her in the custody of an elderly lady named THOMPSON, who agreed to take good care of her.

In a bedroom, Shonibare has created a postcolonial Eliza—a headless wanderer, scary but also scared, perhaps, given that she lived in the wealth amassed by the labor of slaves who were, during her life, emerging from their colonial chains. In a dark parlor, Shonibare also made her into a ghost, haunting a mirror, and I will refrain from any description of the mirror, for fear of spoiling it—you have to see it, hurry.

Other pieces take strategic positions throughout the two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old building. But the conceptual *pièce de résistance*—the artist working in perfect unison with the house, or perhaps vice versa—is “Boy Doing Headstand,” placed in, as mentioned, what was the study and bedchamber of George Washington. During the Revolution, the mansion was of strategic advantage, overlooking the island of Manhattan. (Washington was there when the British invaded Manhattan, in the summer of 1776, and, hearing the commotion, he bolted down to Kip’s Bay, to, by most accounts, rage at the Connecticut regiment that had fled the redcoats.) There’s still a view today, building-blocked but far, off toward the south shore of Brooklyn and Queens.

Upstairs at the Moris-Jumel Mansion, the boy’s exuberance—a tactile joy, in Shonibare’s sculpture—brings out so much about the Washington that is not there, the Washington that through tradition and our perpetuated colonial history haunts the house, not to mention the nation. The feet (and free and lively hands) of the postcolonial boy stand in contrast to the man who worried through the war about keeping his slaves; who, indeed, would not free American slaves at the conclusion of the Revolution, when the British freed those slaves who had pledged loyalty to them, and sent them to Canada and England; who, as President, worried over Toussaint Louverture after Louverture led the

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slave rebellion on the island then known as Hispaniola, and now divided into Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Today, even in the midst of devastating gentrification, Washington Heights is still a Dominican neighborhood, as it has been for decades. It's been fun to visit the mansion over the summer, to see neighborhood kids looking for the ghost, and, hopefully, noting the vitality of the boy alongside the invisible Founding Father.