

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: African Spirits of Modernism

4 June–31 July 2021
Gallery 1 and 2



Gallery Hours

Tuesday to Saturday, 11am–5pm

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Stephen Friedman Gallery is pleased to present British-Nigerian artist **Yinka Shonibare CBE RA's** seventh solo exhibition at the gallery, titled 'African Spirits of Modernism'. Opening on 4 June 2021, the exhibition comprises quilts, sculptures and a series of African masks that engage with the artist's own identity as a 'post-colonial hybrid'. The works are accompanied by archival material that captures the burgeoning interest in African art in Paris in the 1920s.

Playfully described by the artist as "Picasso in reverse", this body of new work explores the relationship between African aesthetics and western modernist expression by juxtaposing icons of classical European antiquity with African artefacts from Picasso's collection. As Shonibare explains, "Picasso was interested in appropriating from another culture, and I also appropriate from European ethnic art." Challenging notions of cultural authenticity, Shonibare suggests that another conversation on diaspora within contemporary society can be had.

The vibrantly coloured textile quilts employ embroidery and appliqué techniques and feature Shonibare's signature batik fabrics that represent flexibility of identity as much as the implications of trade and colonialism. They are combined with a background of diamond-shaped patterns, a nod to the recurring Harlequin motif in Picasso's work, reflecting both artists' interest in the acrobatic 'trickster'. In addition, a new series of masks is directly inspired by Picasso's eclectic collection of such objects, where Shonibare has recreated ceremonial masks from the Fang, Bamana, Bobo and Nalu peoples. These works comment on Picasso's apparent love of objects, especially those in which a kind of metamorphosis between human and animal occurred.

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In three sculptures of mythological hybrid beings – a centaur, a sphinx and Pan – Shonibare takes what we think of as classical marble sculpture and brings them to life by replacing their heads with replicas of masks in Picasso's collection, creating another layering of context – a hybrid from Classical Western antiquity with the gaze of an African spirit. A young centaur is paired with a mask from the Baule people, evoking 'yu', strong spirit powers with human and animal features. The Sphinx, in turn, wears a Bamana hyena mask, worn by youngsters when initiated into the traditions of their tribe. The okuyi mask from the Punu people, representing idealised female beauty, is worn by Pan, the half-man-half-goat god apparently embracing the feminine. By merging powerful African imagery with Western mythological figures, Shonibare creates a composite ideology, what he calls 'a third myth', exploring appropriation, cultural identity and the ability to transform beyond what is expected and therefore compels us to contemplate our world differently.

'African Spirits of Modernism' coincides with a major survey exhibition titled 'End of Empire', at Museum der Moderne, Salzburg (22 May – 12 September 2021).

Yinka Shonibare CBE RA was born in 1962 in London, England and moved to Lagos, Nigeria at the age of three. He lives and works in London. Shonibare was elected as a Royal Academician by the Royal Academy, London in 2013. He was awarded the decoration of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire or MBE in 2004 and Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire or CBE in 2019. In 2021 he received the prestigious Art Icon Award from Whitechapel Gallery, London and was elected to co-ordinate the Summer Exhibition at The Royal Academy of Arts, London.

Shonibare was commissioned by Okwui Enwezor in 2002 to create one of his most recognised works 'Gallantry and Criminal Conversation' for Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany, which launched him on to an international stage. The artist was a Turner prize nominee in 2004. In September 2008 his major mid-career survey commenced at the MCA Sydney and then toured to the Brooklyn Museum, New York and the Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

Shonibare's works are included in prominent collections internationally, including Tate, London, England; Arts Council Collection, London, England; Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England; The British Museum, London, England; The Wellcome Collection, London, England; National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, Italy; and VandenBroek Foundation, The Netherlands.