

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Evening Standard

Artist Deborah Roberts on Yinka Shonibare exhibition and why 'black is not a colour any more'

6 June 2018

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When Deborah Roberts got a call from gallerist Stephen Friedman telling her artist Yinka Shonibare was a fan of her work, she was shocked. “I was like: ‘OK, I’m floored, I love this guy!’”

Friedman was ringing to ask if she’d take part in *Talisman in the Age of Difference*, the show at his gallery curated by Shonibare featuring artists from Africa and the global African diaspora. When asked to participate, says Roberts, she responded: “Hell, yeah! When, where, what can I do?”

Roberts, who lives in her native Austin, Texas, is over for the opening of the show, and when we meet the finishing touches to the densely hung installation are being made. “I love this show, I love the whole idea,” she says.

Shonibare taps into what he calls the “magic and subversive beauty” of art, addressing “the spirit of African resistance and representation”. For Roberts, the show is about diversity within blackness. “It is not a colour any more,” she says. “So

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what does that mean, what does blackness mean? This show exudes blackness in a way that has never been seen before."

Three of Roberts's collages of young black girls feature in the exhibition. They emerged from her desire "to talk about beauty. I found that sometimes people reduce the humanity of those who look different from yourself, and if you have dark skin or brown that is reduced further. I wanted to say you need to see me as a full person. By putting together different faces as one face, it forces the viewer to look at that one face. Once you find that face, you find the humanity." She wants her work "to lure you in before it knocks you out. But as you start seeing some of the tropes I'm talking about, you say: 'Wow, this wasn't candy, this was really medicine, to make me feel better'."



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Roberts is conscious that in using collage to address social issues she enters “a great history of using collage as a political weapon”, and names Hannah Höch, the satirist of Weimar Germany, and Romare Bearden, the great African-American Civil Rights collagist, as influences.

When Roberts first started making the collages, the US had an African-American president. It was in Barack Obama’s America, of course, that the Black Lives Matter movement, protesting about police brutality and systemic racism, emerged in 2013. But the cause has grown even more urgent under Trump. Has this affected Roberts’s work? “I don’t have anything to do with that man the way he divides people,” she says. “My work has always been about individuality. But I think when people say you are ‘less than’, or you are the other, and reduce you down, as this guy has done, then I think the work becomes powerful, a weapon.”

Roberts identifies with Childish Gambino’s music video This is America. “I can’t wait to do some work on that because it’s true: this is America, and a lot of the things that girls of colour are going through right now is rooted in the history of America and the idea that their beauty and somehow their individuality is a secondary thing.”

But amid so much social division she saw one recent event as an affirmation of African-American identity, namely “the blackest royal wedding that ever happened”, as she describes it, with a laugh. “It was beautiful. I mean, we were all behind Meghan. We were sitting Stateside saying this was the best thing ever.” At 55, Roberts is finally gaining art-world recognition — shown by museums such as the Studio Museum in Harlem and being collected including, reportedly, by Beyoncé — later than many artists.

There’s an assurance in her work that often comes with success not arriving overnight. “When you’re older you’ve got grey on your temples and on the top of your hair, so you can tell people, ‘Hey, I had to slow this down because I know this work was not doing what it needs to, because I lived with it when no one wanted it’. I got to slow it down, clean it up, make it stronger and better.”

Talisman in the Age of Difference is at Stephen Friedman Gallery, W1 (stephenfriedman.com) until July 21