

Stephen Friedman Gallery

HYPERALLERGIC

Yinka Shonibare's Lady Justice Transcends Geography

27 Jan 2020

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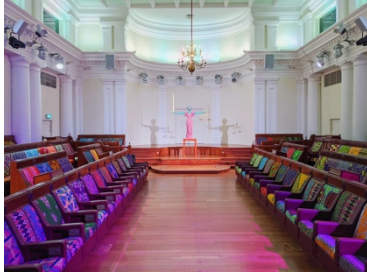


Image: with Justice for All — Shonibare's contribution to Singapore Art Week - the artist represents the multiplicity of voices of a contemporary globalized society.

Installation view of Justice For All: Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) at the Arts House, Singapore (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

SINGAPORE - Every now and then we experience art so perfectly suited for a public space, it raises our appreciation for both. Case in point is Justice For All (2019) by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA), a radical interpretation of F.W. Pomeroy's sculpture "Lady Justice" (1905–1906), now staged in the courtroom of Singapore's historic parliament building on the occasion of the 2020 edition of Singapore Art Week.

Far from her monochromatic predecessor on the Old Bailey in London, Shonibare's Lady Justice has gone full camp. She rocks an audacious fuchsia Batik gown, painted with an all-over floral design. In stark contrast, her exposed skin is an electric turquoise with tattoo-like motifs — a Javanese pattern known as Parang Rusak, traditionally reserved for royalty — snaking round outstretched arms. In lieu of a head we find a beautifully hand-painted globe. To circumvent the messy issue of identification, Shonibare chops her head off; by sticking the world atop her shoulders, his version of Lady Justice transcends our definitions of sex, race, and geography. She represents the multiplicity of voices of a contemporary globalized society.



Image: installation view of Justice For All: Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) at the Arts House, Singapore

The spotlight is on her as she stands ramrod straight, a radiant beacon that takes centerstage in this dim austere chamber.

Wielding a golden sword in one hand and an equally golden judgement scale in the other, she could be a formidable superhero with unfathomable powers coursing within. Besides Lady Justice, Shonibare has also organized an energetic display of Batiks: all the banquette seats in this courtroom have been wrapped in a riot of colorful designs, a brilliant gesture that upends these seats of power.

It was Shonibare's own hybridity — he was born in London but moved to Nigeria as an infant, only to return to London to graduate from Goldsmiths College as part of the notorious YBAs — that launched his career-long inquiry into cultural and national identities. But through his art Shonibare does not impose his political views, rather he is a generous storyteller. And at his disposal is the entire history of colonialism. What better way to highlight the complicated relationships of histories — including his own — than with splashes of color and bizarre imagination?



Image: installation view of Justice For All: Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) at the Arts House, Singapore

Take for example his celebrated use of African Batik fabrics. In his oeuvre we find decapitated courtiers, politicians, dandies, and a whole cast of other Victorian parodies, often fashioned in his indelible clashing Batiks. While Shonibare first discovered these ostensibly "African" fabrics in a market in Brixton, London, these Batik patterns long associated with the African continent are originally from Indonesia, and were first produced by the enterprising Dutch East India Company in the 19th century to be sold back to African markets as authentic cultural markers.

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"I was thinking about the idea of justice: Singapore itself is a very multicultural place. And I wanted a Justice figure that would be there to serve a wide range of the population; the different types of people in Singapore," Shonibare explained during a walkthrough. Indeed, as a trading port city, Singapore has always been a port of call to myriad cultures and races. First built by a Scottish merchant for its advantageous view of incoming vessels, this very building was then rented by colonial authorities in the early 1900s (when Singapore was under British rule) for its legislative assemblies. When Singapore became an independent sovereign state in 1965, it was also here where the first parliamentary session was held. Today the building is not only a public space for the arts, but a gazetted national monument. Much of the interiors have been faithfully restored, and with that its spirit retained.



Image: installation view of Justice For All: Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) at the Arts House, Singapore

Justice For All achieves many things at once: it reveals that an "authentic" national identity is really a complex palimpsest of different cultures and histories, often centered around a proverbial Silk Road. This work also symbolizes the very spirit of being an active participant in a civil society, reminding us that justice does not come easy. Baked in the walls through generations of osmosis are the echoes of bygone trials and tribulations. A poignant line from the 2005 movie adaptation of Alan Moore's "V For Vendetta" comes to mind: "Beneath this mask there is an idea... and ideas are bulletproof." Beneath the brazen Batiks and globe-head is an infallible idea of justice that harks back to the Roman emperor Augustus. What Shonibare, together with curator Zehra Jumabhoy, has achieved is to return an easily overlooked tenet back into our immediate consciousness, contemporizing it for our milieu. This is Shonibare's tribute to the people, past, present, and future.