

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

Yinka Shonibare: 'I see what's happening as an African renaissance'

13 January 2020

Yinka Shonibare

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Image: Yinka Shonibare and his work The British Library, at Tate Modern in April. Photograph: Tabatha Fireman/Getty Images

Over the past decade, I've been running a project space for emerging artists in east London called Guest Projects. Based just off Broadway Market, it supports practitioners in a variety of disciplines, from visual artists to musicians to theatre companies. Not long after setting it up in 2008, I decided I wanted to make the project

international. As I have roots in Nigeria, and the creative scene there is so exciting, Nigeria seemed like the right place to do it.

About eight years ago, I acquired some land in Lagos. Now we're in the process of building a residency in Lekki, a rapidly developing area in the east of the city. It will house three artists at a time, with studio and gallery spaces on the ground floor, and residents' bedrooms above.

The project also extends to a 30-acre farm in Ijebu, three hours northeast of Lagos. We're in the process of landscaping and building a barn house and studios for artists, using sustainable materials such as mud, as well as a walled garden where people can learn about indigenous plants. Lagos is a very busy urban area with a lot of nightlife and music, so Ijebu will be for artists who need a more quiet space to produce work on a larger scale (there also will be a sculpture garden on the farm).

Image: 'A two-way exchange.' Yinka Shonibare's proposed Guest Artists Space (G.A.S) Foundation. Photograph: Courtesy of Yinka Shonibare



The Guest Artists Space (G.A.S.) Foundation, as the new project is called, will be a two-way exchange. International visitors will be able to offer advice and support to local artists, but they will also receive knowledge. There's so much to learn in [Africa](#), and so many amazing artists and intellectuals, and the project spaces will provide a platform for exchange, for debate, for collaboration. There will be opportunities for visitors to work alongside

African artists, to debate alongside them, to explore work, and leave with a completely different perspective. I've done residencies myself in the past and I always come back with a changed view of the world.

African artists have always been there, doing fantastic work, and the rest of the world is only just catching up. When I was growing up in Nigeria in the 1970s, the music scene was incredible, thanks to artists such as Fela Kuti, and culture was very much part of my early experience. The arts suffered under the military regime in the 1980s and 90s, but Nigeria is more democratic now and the liberal arts are thriving again. The city has

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the [Art X Lagos](#) art fair, which draws collectors and artists from around the world. The middle class is growing and people have more disposable income. And there is still so much untapped potential. I see what's happening in Nigeria and across the continent as a kind of African renaissance.

As well as facilitating cultural exchange and giving artists a space to work in, I want this project to support the local ecosystem and economy. In Ijebu, I have employed 12 farm workers, installed five greenhouses (growing tomatoes, peppers and other vegetables) and planted two acres each of maize, plantain and cassava. The point of all this is to help develop food security and sustainability in an area where unemployment is high and food



supply is precarious. Bringing people to the farm, for arts events as well as residencies, should also provide a boost for the local economy.

Image: 'A boost for the local economy ...' Architectural drawings of Yinka Shonibare's Ecology Green Farm in Nigeria. Photograph: Courtesy of Yinka Shonibare

There have been challenges along the way. I've learned that when you're doing a building project, you have to be extremely patient with things like planning permission. And when you set up a foundation, you have to listen to the board of trustees. You can't just go ahead and do things yourself, like you would in a studio.

But the project is coming together. The farm is operational now and we should have the buildings and project spaces finished by the end of 2020. The building in Lagos will be ready by mid-2021 – I may launch it to coincide with the art fair in November that year. And we've got a very interesting, diverse range of trustees on our board, including artists [El Anatsui](#), [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#), and [Olafur Eliasson](#).

As with the space in London, the residencies in Nigeria will be multi-disciplinary, rather than focusing narrowly on visual arts. Each residency will last three months, but we also want to offer long-term support for individual artists, equipping them to thrive not just survive, and I will be collaborating with other institutions and individuals to achieve that.

International exchange has a very strong value, especially in a world where there's a great deal of conflict, and I believe that going to see other cultures, and being creative with other cultures, is really a very positive way forward. It can be a true vehicle for social change.