

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Singapore Tatler

British-Nigerian Artist Yinka Shonibare Offers a Singaporean Take On F W Pomeroy's "Lady Justice" Sculpture

Hashirin Nurin Hashimi

13 January 2020

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The site-specific installation "Justice for All" located at The Arts House takes inspiration from the building's heritage and features Shonibare's signature "African" batik

One of the signature elements—and perhaps the most recognisable—of British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's works is his use of "African" batik. The cultural hybridity of the Indonesian wax-printed fabric, which was mass-produced in the Netherlands and later popularised in West Africa, offers an insight into his art, which explores colonialism and post-colonialism in the context of globalisation.

The theme is also central to his latest site-specific installation, *Justice for All*, at The Arts House's Chamber. Part of this year's Singapore Art Week, the exhibition held from January 13 to 30 draws upon the history and politics in relation to the building and offers a Singaporean reinterpretation of British sculptor F W Pomeroy's *Lady Justice* (1906), located on top of London's Central Criminal Court, also known as The Old Bailey. In place of her golden garb, the Singaporean Lady Justice is robed in a brightly-patterned "African" batik.



Image: *Justice for All* (2019) by Yinka Shonibare

Shonibare, who was awarded the Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) last year, following the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) he received in 2005, explains, "*Justice for All* is about the representation of equality, of representing the different ethnic influences that contribute to the identity of Singapore itself. It is intended as a celebration of the hybridity of these influences." While the monumental sculptural installation may be situated indoors, it will retain the dramatic impact of

public sculpture. In the last decade, Shonibare has increasingly included public art into his artistic repertoire of painting, sculpture, photography, film and installation for he says "access to art is better explored within the public realm, not necessarily within an elitist artist setting; that's why it's important to me that all kinds of people can experience my art".

The artist is also dedicated to facilitating international artistic exchange and developing creative practices through artist residencies and international collaborations with his non-profit Guest Artists Space Foundation. Its new artist residency space in Lagos, Nigeria is set to open in 2021.

What is it about the historicity of The Arts House that stood out for you?

Yinka Shonibare Singapore used to be a colony of the UK. The building itself was a colonial courthouse and later, the site of Singapore's first parliamentary sitting. Because of its historical legacy, I thought it would be interesting to make artistic interventions in the building.

What is the significance of F W Pomeroy's *Lady Justice*?

YS The work is essentially about fairness and even-handedness without prejudice, which is signified by the metaphor of the scales. The sword symbolises judiciary power and authority. The significance of

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Pomeroy's *Lady Justice* is to reference the historical ties between "old Singapore" as a British colony, and Singapore as an independent republic today.



Image: Yinka Shonibare

What are you currently fascinated by and how is it influencing your work?

YS I am interested in the role that African aesthetics played in shaping Western Modernist expression, through research into Picasso's collection of African artefacts and how the idea of freedom of expression in Modernism derives from the abstraction in African sculpture and masks—for instance, parallels can be drawn between the ancient sculpture of black idol worship and the fundamentals of the Cubist movement.

You recently announced the launch of the Guest. Artists. Space. Foundation. Why are such artist residencies crucial to the career of an artist?

YS Residencies have contributed a great deal to my own knowledge and world view. The residencies I participated in, both in Senegal and Sweden, changed the trajectory of my art practice, that's why I think it's important for other artists to have such an opportunity.

What potential do you see in the young artists from across Africa and the diaspora?

YS There is very exciting work coming out of Africa at the moment, particularly in Nigeria with the development of the Lagos Biennial and Art X Lagos art fair. Africa and the Global

South are quickly becoming a countering voice to Western perspectives on contemporary art.