

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Telegraph  
Yinka Shonibare interview  
Chris Harvey  
29 June 2020

# The Telegraph

### Yinka Shonibare interview: 'No amount of money can compensate for the damage done by slavery'

As the business world backs compensation for slavery, sculptor Yinka Shonibare talks to Chris Harvey



Image: Yinka Shonibare in London.  
Credit: Wig Worland

Dark clouds loom above the deserted pavements of Savile Row, where headless besuited mannequins eerily guard the windows of London's most famous bespoke tailors. Just around the corner stands another figure behind glass, this time in a gallery. With a hand-painted globe for a head, and a set of scales in one hand and a shining sword in the

other, her colourfully patterned Dutch wax print dress marks her out as the work of Yinka Shonibare CBE.

This is Justice for All, a sculpture by the British-Nigerian artist that has a remarkable prescience. It was created for an exhibition earlier this year in the former British colony of Singapore, in a gallery that was once a 19th-century courthouse. The figure is based on the golden statue of Lady Justice that stands atop the Old Bailey. Shonibare said he was expressing a desire for "an egalitarian world where justice is fair for everyone regardless of race, religion or geography".

Then came the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota. The work took on new significance, and the decision was taken by the Stephen Friedman Gallery to show it in the UK, in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. For three decades, Shonibare, now 57, has been making some of the most playful, colourful, theatrical work in British art, including Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, the model of Lord Nelson's ship the Victory that graced the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square from 2010 to 2012.

But there is almost always a darker political undertone, relating to colonialism and race. In Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads (1998), for instance (his sculptural take on a famous 1750 Gainsborough painting), he acknowledges a reference to the guillotine of the French Revolution. "History is dark," he says. "You see those paintings, you see those stately homes, but you don't see what had to happen [for them to be there]. You don't see the relationship between the British gentry and the slaves either."

In recent weeks, though, Britain's uneasy relationship with its slave-trading past has come to the fore. Every day has brought a new apology for historic links to slavery, from the Church of England to the Bank of England and, on the day I catch up with Shonibare at home, insurers Lloyd's of London, who promise financial reparations for the role played by their insurance market in the 18th-and 19th-century slave trade.

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Image: Yinka Shonibare, 'Justice for All' (2019) at the Stephen Friedman Gallery. Credit: Mark Blower

"It's a start," says Shonibare, "but they'll never have enough money to actually compensate for the damage – the psychological damage and the loss of identity cannot be paid for." As for the statue felling that the Black Lives Matter protests have precipitated, he believes it's unfair to have monuments to those who "have been involved in that horrific trade", but says you have to have consensus: "I don't think you can just go into communities and do what you like." He is not calling for statues to be destroyed, either, and believes there should be a national slavery museum. "We should learn from history."

Shonibare was born in London to Nigerian parents, who moved back to Lagos when he was three. He grew up there, a curious and dreamy child, attending art workshops on Saturdays at the National Museum. "Visual arts and culture generally in the Seventies were really thriving before military rule," he recalls. (A coup in 1983 overthrew the Second Nigerian Republic of the former colony and replaced it with a junta.) After Shonibare returned to Britain at 17 to do his A-levels, he contracted transverse myelitis, an inflammation of the spinal cord. "I went from being a fit 19-year-old to lying in bed completely paralysed from the neck down. It took me at least three years to be able to start walking again." Later, however, there was a further deterioration. "In my mid 40s, I was still walking about, but in my late 40s, I started getting weaker and having falls, so I chose to use a wheelchair."

At 22, he went to art college, where he won an award for portraiture but, as he became politicised, "I decided that I wanted to change my materials, change everything". Around 1989, he began using brightly coloured Dutch wax fabrics. They are widely worn in Africa, but have their roots in Indonesian batik prints, and were imported from the Netherlands – a twist on African "authenticity" that appealed to him. They have become a signature in his art – which has continued to appreciate in value.

In 2018, the sculpture *Girl Balancing Knowledge* (2015) was sold at auction for £236,750. I wonder if Shonibare – an alumnus of the seminal *Sensation* exhibition, and therefore part of the unafraid-to-be-entrepreneurial YBA generation – finds an irony in the way that being a successful artist in the UK is akin to being part of the aristocracy. "I don't think a lot of artists would say that," he says. "I think we're kind of tolerated."



Image: Yinka Shonibare, 'Nelson's ship in a Bottle' (2010). Credit: David Westwood

At the time of the fourth plinth unveiling, he described the then mayor of London as "my old mate Boris"; does he still think of him that way? "I was probably joking," he laughs. "But, well, a lot has changed. Boris didn't have power then. I wouldn't be doing my job correctly if I was matey with the Prime Minister." In fact, he has a bone to pick with the Government over its failure to protect creative industries in the pandemic. "Theatre, music and visual arts are really struggling, and this is going to hit a lot of artists really hard. In Germany, the government stepped in and helped the sector. I think the British Government should study that model carefully and do a similar thing over here. We all pay huge taxes, and if we are protected as a sector, we will pay the Government back."

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Shonibare has been helping out, designing a face mask to support local museums and emerging artists, and contributing work to the 2020 Solidarity campaign to support night clubs, music venues and arts spaces. A lot of his own cash, he says, has been going to support a foundation he set up in 2019 to promote the arts in the UK and Nigeria. He is creating an international residency space in Lagos, with a 54-acre farm outside the city. "I have about 10 farm workers there planting cassava and maize; we've been training them in organic farming methods."

He hopes artists who have never been to Africa will gain a deeper cultural understanding by visiting his foundation, although the pandemic has delayed its planned opening until 2021. Meanwhile, during lockdown, he has had time to reflect, away from the travelling that comes with a contemporary art career. He's been drawing a lot and thinking about the exhibition he will open next year in London. "All I can say is that the show is based on Picasso's collection of African art. We'll see how that turns out ..."