

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Financial Times  
Yinka Shonibare: Whitechapel Art Icon weaves the fabric of change  
Caroline Roux  
20 February 2021



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In spite of lockdown, a Salzburg retrospective and a Lagos residency add up to a busy year for the British-Nigerian artist

You might expect a contemporary artist's Zoom call background to be of a superior quality — and Yinka Shonibare's does not disappoint. Behind him, as we talk, is a bespoke wallpaper of warm tangerine, screen-printed all over with teetering tripods in pink, jade and violet. Shonibare is well known for plundering western art's chocolate-box classics, from Fragonard's cheeky girl on a swing to Raeburn's skating reverend, turning them into headless statues, and remaking their clothing in dazzling batik textiles. For Zoom — a medium that offers a subverted version of face-to-face interaction — he has quite rightly turned his attention to Andy Warhol instead.

Shonibare has hardly left his home in east London since last March. Partially paralysed since contracting a spinal virus in his late teens, he is in a vulnerable group, and the millennial-approved area where he lives — Victoria Park — is not known for its social distancing. Neither is nearby Broadway Market, where he has had a studio for over a decade.

“But I've never been so busy,” he says. He is working towards the opening of a mid-career retrospective in Salzburg; putting the finishing touches (remotely) to an artists' residency in Lagos; and in the very early stages of designing a memorial in Leeds for David Oluwale, a British-Nigerian whom police hounded to a death by drowning in 1969.

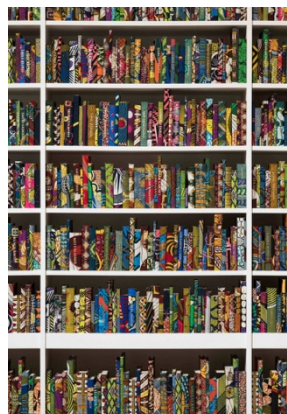


Image: Yinka Shonibare's 'The British Library' (2014) © Tate Modern (Oliver Cowling)

And on March 20, he will be honoured at the Whitechapel Gallery as its eighth Art Icon — a ceremony that celebrates a living artist as a prelude to its annual fundraising auction to support its education programme. “Yes, really busy,” he says. “I even managed to have a sellout show in New York in December.” The four new works shown then at the James Cohan gallery were child-sized sculptures representing the new (Thunberg) generation of environmental activists, their globe heads bent over images of a planet on fire. Shonibare, who has long been concerned with the history and consequences of colonialism, has turned his attention to the other ways in which humanity has been busy destroying the very world it occupies.

As for the speedy sales: “I've always been popular in America, well before I was nominated for the Turner Prize in the UK [in 2004],” says Shonibare. “There might be a more ready audience there for the issues I raise around diversity and representation.” Shonibare was born in London in 1962 to Nigerian parents, and moved to Lagos aged three. He was taught by Irish nuns, and though no longer attached to any religion he says: “Catholicism stays with you — the concept, if not the reality, of guilt and shame.”

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Image: 'Party Time: Re-imagine America' (2009) by Yinka Shonibare © Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; Newark Museum, NJ, photograph by Ross Whitake

It was a family trip to Rome that perhaps had more consequence. "I was about 14, we went to the Sistine Chapel, I did a drawing of the Coliseum," he recalls. "It had a huge impact on me — the scale, the art everywhere." Returning to the UK to study at London's Byam Shaw School of Art, where the highly coloured and geometrically precise paintings of Euan Uglow were the works to follow ("and not much use to me, really"), he moved on to Goldsmiths' College of Art, already known for a more radical practice.

While the black British artists who had gone before him — Keith Piper, Sonia Boyce — had developed their space outside the mainstream art world, Shonibare decided he wanted to express himself within it, to be seen and heard. "It was a question of power, and the art world wasn't ready for them, but they'd paved a path for me," he says now. He started working with the batik fabric with which he is now most closely associated — a textile of Indonesian origin, mass-manufactured in the Netherlands, and sold in many parts of Africa. In it Shonibare sees all the messy misunderstandings, exploitations and cross-pollinations of the colonial and postcolonial condition.



Image: Shonibare's 'End of Empire' (2016), commissioned for the 14-18 Now project © Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London; photograph by Stephen White & Co

Shonibare is reluctant to call the Salzburg show, at the Museum der Moderne in Monchsberg, a retrospective. "I'm 58, I'm not in a hurry," he says. It will show works going back to the mid-1990s, and though it is still in development, its title — End of Empire — is secured. This refers to a work that Shonibare created for the 14-18 Now project, which commemorated 100 years since the end of the first world war: two figures sit either end of a moving see-saw, their globe heads elaborating the countries involved in the war, their precarious balance representing the fragile conditions of conflict. "It's this idea that the arguments are shifting constantly; I didn't want it to be didactic or simplistic," he says. "But it's important to me also as a time of societal shift, and that paved the way to independence for some colonies."

Elsewhere in the exhibition will be works from his more recent "Roman Statues" series, in which he subverts the idea of the "white" classical Greek and Roman statue, painting their clothing with brilliantly coloured patterns. His reinterpretation of the "Discus Thrower (after Myron)" is particularly poignant. "We know Hitler had a copy of that statue," he says. "In it is the narrative of heroic white men, and the superiority expressed through athletics. We need to diversify that message."

Shonibare has no idea if he will make it to the opening in Salzburg in May. A trip to Lagos has now been postponed from July to October, by which time he is hoping that the artists' residence will be complete. It is, he explains, in the form of a courtyard house that combines modernist and traditional Yoruba architecture, designed by London-based Ghanaian Elsie Owusu. It will welcome three artists at a time to encourage a dialogue between international and local practitioners.

Three hours' drive from Lagos, in Ijebu, another part of the project is taking shape. This is a 50-acre farm where, alongside sustainable agriculture and a barn where artists can stay, there will be craft workshops in which Nko women weavers will create their traditional cloth. "I want to encourage local enterprise," says Shonibare, "to sell the local fabrics internationally." An artist whose main medium has been textiles, he is once again using it to weave the fabric of change. x