

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

It's Nice That

"I don't care what people think. As artists, we have to express ourselves": Yinka Ilori in conversation with Yinka Shonibare

Yinka Ilori

29 June 2021

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Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: End of Empire, 2016. Fibreglass mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, metal, wood, motor, globes and leather, 296 x 510 x 99cm (116 1/2 x 200 3/4 x 39 in). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Stephen White & Co.

Our guest editor sits down with one of his very favourite artists, Yinka Shonibare, for an inspiring conversation on storytelling in art practices, identity and heritage.

A few days ago I was at an opening and met a guy, a skater from Nigeria, who told me that at his university, they taught a semester based on my work. My immediate thought was, "This isn't good," as I don't really believe in asking students to emulate someone's work or a particular style. I actually think it can be quite damaging and confusing for some. The guy told me he actually failed the semester; I said I bet you did.

I remember at school being given all these artists in exercises just like that, from Picasso to Francis Bacon. It was similar when I was studying furniture and product design, where we were taught all these kinds of masters from the 1970s – obviously iconic designers who had produced pieces of iconic furniture, but I couldn't connect. No one was talking about the things I wanted to talk about.

Then, years ago when I was writing my dissertation (I'm 34 now) on the importance of Dutch wax prints, I came across Yinka Shonibare's work. The first piece I saw, as you'll hear in our conversation, was his Globe Head Ballerina. I immediately had questions. What was the thought process? Why have they done this? I think Yinka lures us in so we become engaged, so you want to know more and leave feeling a different way to how you walked in. An artwork by Yinka Shonibare is often so powerful you can't escape it. I've been following him ever since then.

This approach is what I love about Yinka's work. I too try to create work that is humorous when you first look at it, but when you dig deep there is a message behind it. Whether it's race, identity, politics or love, there will be something you can take away to hopefully educate you, inspire you, or challenge the way you think. I think that's what Yinka Shonibare brings to the table.

As an artist, I think he is also able to talk about topics that other people just don't want to mention. I often find that you can tell when someone is thinking about something, but they just can't say it. Yinka is able to bring topics people do actually want to discuss to the forefront. He's unafraid and unapologetic. That may come with years of growth – I remember when I was starting out, I was very afraid of bringing in my culture, calling things out or celebrating what it means to be a British-Nigerian. But when I saw Yinka's work, David Adjaye's work, Chris Ofili's work, artists who tell similar stories, I felt I could relate. I felt it was okay to talk about the things I wanted to talk about because they are too.

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**Yinka Ilori:** I know you're extremely busy so I'm glad you had some time to speak to me! First of all, I want to know what it was like growing up in Lagos and London? And do you think that had an impact on your work and the themes you investigate today?

**Yinka Shonibare:** Well, Lagos is a crazy city and growing up in Lagos was really impactful. I remember in 1977, there was Festac, the Second Festival of Black Arts and Culture. People like Stevie Wonder and Sun Ra were there, alongside people from many different African countries. There was theatre from South Africa and Ipi Tombe – that was the first theatre piece I actually saw. I don't know if you know Lagos well?

**YI:** I do, I do.

**YS:** And then, of course, Fela Kuti was still alive then. He was always on TV. I mean, my parents wouldn't let me anywhere near the place because you know, Fela Kuti and his dope and all the women... I would have got thrashed for even suggesting it.



Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: End of Empire, 2016. Fibreglass mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, metal, wood, motor, globes and leather, 296 x 510 x 99cm (116 1/2 x 200 3/4 x 39 in). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Stephen White & Co.

**YI:** It must have been incredible being able to experience his music at that time. Did you go to his concerts at all? You didn't break the rules and sneak out?

**YS:** I think I would have been flogged. Not even for going there, if I'd just suggested it!

**YI:** As a young kid what did your parents think about you wanting to be an artist, then? Did they have plans for you to be an engineer, an architect maybe?

**YS:** Oh yeah, absolutely. I've got three siblings – the eldest is a surgeon, my sister is a dentist and my younger brother is a banker.

**YI:** So they ticked all the boxes?

**YS:** Being an artist wasn't part of the plan. No way.

**YI:** How did you convince them, or how did they come around? Was it a slow process, or did they say, "Yinka, you're an artist," and you could do what you want?

**YS:** Oh no, it wasn't like that. It was a big struggle. I had a big struggle with my dad for years, even when I went to art school it was a huge struggle. There's a very funny story though. So, I became an artist in London and I started getting some success. There was this party at Windsor Castle and the Queen invited me – my family are kind of royalists; they love the royal family – I told my dad and he was really excited about it. Then I heard him on the phone, speaking to a friend saying, "Oh, of course, I encouraged him to do a masters degree in art and now look what's happened, he's famous." But now they're very proud, of course, and a lot has happened since then. Unfortunately, my father passed away just before I was awarded the MBE, but my family are really proud of me now.

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**YI:** I came across your work in 2009. I was writing my dissertation on the topic of West African fabrics, Dutch wax prints in particular, on how it's used in communities as a form of identity, of celebrating one's culture. The first piece I saw was the Globe Head Ballerina and I became obsessed with your work and have been ever since. At that time I was blown away by how you explored race, class and identity through print. Did you know that would be a theme you'd be exploring for a long time?

**YS:** You see, I think that context and history are very important. As people of African origin in this country, there is a whole history to that. When I was in college I thought I was a citizen of the world. I thought as an artist of African origin, I could explore anything I wanted until one of the tutors told me, "You are of African origin, aren't you? Why aren't you producing authentic African art?" I thought what do you mean by that? Would you ask an English artist to make work about Morris dancing? You wouldn't, would you?

But then I realised, because of the colour of my skin and my background, certain expectations were projected onto me. Whether I like it or not, that's just the way that it was, and in many ways still is. I realised I needed to face the topic head-on. I needed to look at my relationship as an African with the UK and the whole history of colonisation and empire. To try and understand it, historically.

I then went to Brixton market in search of my so-called authenticity and started talking to people about the fabrics. I thought the fabrics were entirely of African origin. I didn't realise that the Dutch were influenced by Indonesian batik and I thought that was really fascinating – given that the idea of authenticity was being projected. Why is it then as Africans, we are not seen as global citizens who can be influenced by anything? That's kind of how the whole journey actually began.

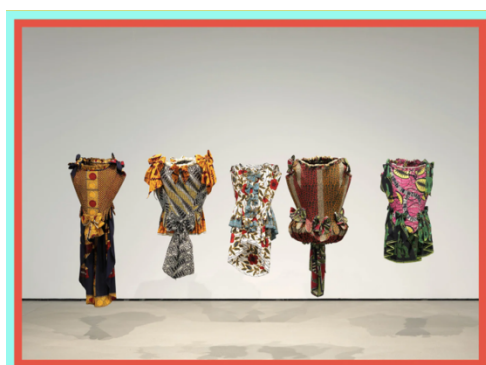


Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: End of Empire, solo exhibition, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria (2021). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE RA. Courtesy the artist and Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria. Photo by Rainer Iglar.

**YI:** Wow, wow, wow. When I saw it, it blew me away. I even remember how I felt when I saw it. Over the decades you've become well known for your exploration of colonialism and post-colonialism within contemporary globalisation. What drew you to these themes? Some of them can be uncomfortable for some viewers. Were you aware of that? Did you care?

**YS:** No, I don't care about views and I don't care what people think. As artists, we have to express ourselves. If somebody gets upset, well that's not your problem really. And also, let's face it, you know the whole George Floyd issue? This stuff is still here and some of us have to be vocal about it. We have to be vocal about power relations. How come there are many more people of African origin in prison, both here and in the United States? That's real evidence that we can't be silent on these issues.

**YI:** No totally.

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**YS:** And these issues are here every day. Yes, my art has politics in it, but art should be more than that as well. Art is a multi-layered thing; if you listen to Fela Kuti, it's very political.

**YI:** Yes, very.



Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: End of Empire, solo exhibition, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria (2021). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE RA. Courtesy the artist and Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria. Photo by Rainer Iglar.

**YS:** But the music is fantastic, and you would say the same for Marvin Gaye.

**YI:** Totally!

**YS:** I'm an artist still at the end of the day. I may voice certain things in my practice, but I am an artist.

**YI:** You're right. Do you think it's important for artists to tell stories and celebrate where they're from? I feel you celebrate both your cultures really well, whether it's political, about race or personal. Do you think storytelling is important?

**YS:** Storytelling is an essential part of any kind of expression; be it theatre, be it music. Human cultures have always done that, from cave paintings to the present. You have to tell your story and my story is a kind of multi-dimensional story. It's the experience of having grown up in Lagos but also living in the UK.

Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: End of Empire, solo exhibition, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria (2021). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE RA. Courtesy the artist and Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria. Photo by Rainer Iglar.

**YI:** So were you born in Nigeria?

**YS:** I was born in the UK but I went back to Nigeria with my parents because they wanted me to learn discipline in Nigeria.

**YI:** I've been threatened with that a few times myself! They didn't do it though! But my parents were very strict with me, very strict. It was a religious family, church every Sunday, and I think it kept me on the straight and narrow. I'm quite grateful for it.

**YS:** Good! I didn't like it at the time, I have to admit, but actually, discipline is good. It's really helped me in my work.

**YI:** Me too.

**YS:** I don't miss deadlines; all those things count.

**YI:** They do Yinka, they do. Last year with the pandemic, I found projects were being cancelled and things didn't go as planned. Did things change for you? Are you thinking differently?

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**YS:** Well I think, because of the stage of my career right now, thankfully, we've been able to work remotely. The way I've set up my studio as well – because I have a team in my studio – many of my team could work in isolation. I actually managed to do a sell-out show in New York, in lockdown.

**YI:** Wow!

**YS:** Yeah, I also prepared a show at Museum der Moderne Salzburg. I guess you would call it, I don't like this word, but it's a sort of retrospective with almost 60 works.

**YI:** It does feel like a retrospective, but I remember reading that you don't like the word, so I won't say that!

**YS:** I am still a spring chicken, why should I use that word?

**YI:** Good for you!

**YS:** Retrospectives are for people who are just about to die. I've still got a lot of work in front of me that I've got to do.

**YI:** It makes sense. You've got another show at Stephen Friedman Gallery, African Spirits of Modernism. For me, the title was super fascinating and you describe it as 'a Picasso in reverse'. Can you explain what you mean by that?

**YS:** Throughout history, if you look at Western Art, be it Matisse or Picasso, a lot of artists took their influence from African art very clearly. It's not a problem, but when an African artist does the same it can be described sometimes – and I've heard this term – as derivative. But if a Western artist takes from African art, of course, they've got a right to do that. This show is based on the premise that I discovered that Picasso collected over 100 African artefacts and if you look at his paintings, you will see the influence of African art.

The other reason for doing the exhibition is that at the moment artists of African origin are the kind of hottest thing, they've become really fashionable. But we had that moment in Paris in the 1920s and in 30s America with the Harlem Renaissance. There were Black performers like Josephine Baker in Paris, Black intellectuals like James Baldwin. There was a Black moment that was super fashionable.

The important thing politically is that we're not fashion. We are here to stay. The work should be respected because, as you know, people take from Black artists, it goes mainstream, and then the artists are not

remembered. In the context of the George Floyd moment that we're in – although this show was actually conceived beforehand – the important thing is to realise that we need to look at those power relations and that's what this show is about.



Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: End of Empire, solo exhibition, Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria (2021). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE RA. Courtesy the artist and Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria. Photo by Rainer Iglar.

**YI:** I'll be there for sure. And the show in Austria, End of Empire. What's that show about? It's quite a strong title.

**YS:** The title is taken from a piece of work I was commissioned to make during the centenary of the first world war. When the first world war happened, there were many colonies dragged in who fought on behalf of their former colonial countries. I was thinking about the idea of conflict, the

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opposing sides of the war, so I represented them with two men on seesaws. It's a kinetic work where they're wearing Victorian suits made from African textiles with globes on their heads, representing the regions they are from. The work itself kind of moves, which I used as a metaphor for war and conflict. War is not inevitable, so at some points, there is a kind of balance where the seesaw is level, but then they shift positions as well.

**YI:** That's beautiful. I've learned that there is a sense of humour, a bit of playfulness, to your work. But once you get past the humour there is obviously a really powerful message and narrative. What are you trying to do to the audience?

**YS:** Some have described it as gallows humour, which is dark humour. Basically, I am dealing with very serious subjects but I don't want the audience to be scared or afraid, so you create something that is humorous, like satire really. The underdog has always created satire against the ruling party, it's a tradition throughout history. That's the best way to handle some of these things because they are so absurd and outrageous.



Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: Hybrid Sculpture (Sphinx), 2021. Fibreglass sculpture, hand painted with Dutch wax pattern with hand carved wooden mask. Figure: 164 x 104 x 117cm (60 5/8 x 20 7/8 x 45 5/8in). Plinth: 70 x 60 x 87.5cm (27 1/2 x 23 5/8 x 34 1/2in). Overall: 224 x 60 x 116cm (88 1/4 x 23 5/8 x 45 5/8in). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Stephen White & Co.

**YI:** I know, I know. How many exhibitions have you had? Is there one that has changed your career, maybe had the most impact on an audience?

**YS:** How many cakes have you eaten?

**YI:** Thousands! Millions! Haha, what about artworks? What would you say is a favourite?

**YS:** I would say the one that had the most impact on my career, and on the public, is Nelson's Ship in a Bottle for the Fourth Plinth at Trafalgar Square.

**YI:** Oh, I love that piece. Incredible, I love it.



**YS:** As you know millions of people pass Trafalgar Square. So, now I get in a black cab and the drivers will say to me, "What do you do?" I say, "Did you see the ship in a bottle?" And they go, "Wow, is that yours!" It's crazy because cab drivers know about that piece. Millions, absolutely millions saw that piece. It's now in front of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, permanently.

**YI:** I remember seeing it with my mum and dad actually. They were asking me how it got into the bottle, really trying to rack their brain, we were all asking how. It's really very special.

Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, 2009. Plastic, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, cork, acrylic and glass bottle, 40 x 73 x 38cm (15 3/4 x 28 3/4 x 15in). Plinth: 44.9 x 51 x 24.5cm (17 3/4 x 20 x 9 3/4 in) Edition 9 of 9 +1AP. Photo by Stephen White & Co.

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**YS:** I wanted to talk to you about Lagos.

**YI:** Yes!

**YS:** I don't know if you know, but I've started a foundation and I'm building an artist residency space in Lagos.

**YI:** I have heard this, yes.

**YS:** So we'll have bedrooms and space where the artists can work. But the interesting thing is that just about two hours outside Lagos we also have a 54-acre farm with a farmhouse. We're doing agriculture, sustainable farming and a bit of conservation. 54 acres is like 54 football fields. Our plan is to actually bring diaspora artists – British artists, American, Asian – to Africa because cultural exchange is very important. It's work I'm passionate about and I will have an apartment in the house, so I can actually be there. It's called G.A.S – Guest Artist Space – Foundation.

**YI:** And what type of artists can apply?

**YS:** Any art form! It can go from computer game design to graphics, anything, even curators and writers. It's a kind of multi-dimensional residency.



Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: Hybrid Sculpture (Centaur), 2021. Fibreglass sculpture, hand painted with Dutch wax pattern with hand carved wooden mask. Figure: 165 x 68 x 121cm (64 5/8 x 25 5/8 x 45 5/8in). Plinth: 70 x 57.5 x 130cm (27 1/2 x 22 5/8 x 51 1/8in). Overall: 234 x 65 x 130 cm (92 1/8 x 25 5/8 x 51 1/8in). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Stephen White & Co.

**YI:** I've always wanted to do work in Lagos. There are so many amazing artists, designers and illustrators in Nigeria. I wonder, if I wanted to work with someone in Lagos, maybe a furniture designer and we wanted to collaborate, could we work like that?

**YS:** I mean that is the point, it's cultural exchange. As you know, most Africans end up travelling to the West, but the traffic doesn't seem to go the other way. Therefore, there's a lot of ignorance about this very culturally rich area. We need to provide the infrastructure so that people can have a place to stay, a place to work. That's what I've been working on. I'm also particularly excited about the farm because that means we're not just contributing to the art side of things. The farm is employment and we're doing practical things by actually producing food.

**YI:** What kind of things will you be farming?

**YS:** Oh, we've already started, we're harvesting already. We have ten greenhouses and we've got peppers, red, green, yellow pepper, habanero pepper, we have eight acres of cassava.

**YI:** Wow! Wow, Yinka. I'll be there when it launches!

**YS:** Congratulations on your Brits work, by the way, I saw that.

**YI:** Thank you Yinka. That's so kind of you. It was nice to be out, to see people and live music.

**YS:** It's been a hard year, so it's good you got that. Was it before Covid-19 or after?

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**YI:** During Covid-19, yeah. Es Devlin got in touch and asked if I wanted to work on the Brits and I said I'd love to. But I've been creating homeware – bone chinaware and all that kind of thing – it's been ticking away while it's been quiet.



Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: Hybrid Sculpture (Centaur), 2021. Fibreglass sculpture, hand painted with Dutch wax pattern with hand carved wooden mask. Figure: 165 x 68 x 121cm (64 5/8 x 25 5/8 x 45 5/8in). Plinth: 70 x 57.5 x 130cm (27 1/2 x 22 5/8 x 51 1/8in). Overall: 234 x 65 x 130 cm (92 1/8 x 25 5/8 x 51 1/8in). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Stephen White & Co.

**YS:** That's really good. It's another thing we want to do, maybe we can collaborate on the farm? Nigeria actually has a strong history of ceramics and pottery. The potential in Nigeria is huge, it's just huge.

**YI:** My parents always say this to me, I think because I only ever go for a week or two weeks, I never get my teeth stuck in. It's always short visits. I need to stay longer and see what is possible.

**YS:** It's not like it was when our parents left. There are many more economic opportunities and people are very entrepreneurial – you know about Burna Boy?

**YI:** Yes, yes!

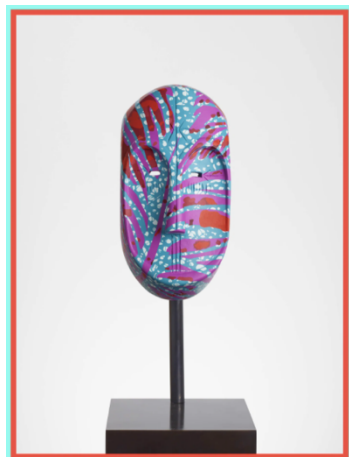
**YS:** That was not possible when my parents were in Nigeria. All these guys have private jets, you know that?

**YI:** I've seen!

**YS:** I mean, that wouldn't have been possible in the 70s.

**YI:** Why was that the case?

**YS:** The world is better networked and linked. In the past, Africans would wear terrible shoes and that's not the case now, because people are linked. Do you know what I mean? The whole world is different. Something that happens in New York is in Lagos in a second.



**YI:** A second is correct. Where else do you travel other than Lagos?

**YS:** Senegal is amazing. Oh my gosh, Senegal, it's really fantastic. The arts are just crazy and there's really good music. Do you know Kehinde Wiley?

**YI:** I do, yeah.

Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: Hybrid Mask (Fang), 2020-2021. Hand painted wooden mask on a brass clad plinth, 33 x 19 x 16cm (13 x 7 1/2 x 6 1/4in). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by Stephen White & Co.

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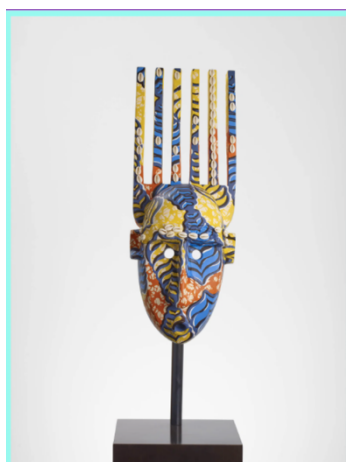


Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA: Hybrid Mask (Ntomo), 2020 - 2021. Hand painted wooden mask with shells on a brass clad plinth, 58 x 21.5 x 15.5cm (22 7/8 x 8 1/2 x 6 1/8in). Copyright Yinka Shonibare CBE. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Photo by StephenWhite & Co.

**YS:** He's got a residency in Senegal, a really nice building and the same thing with artists going. The traffic is definitely going back to Africa. And David Adjaye, the architect, has moved to Ghana. We're both curating the Royal Academy Summer Show this year.

**YI:** Can we talk about that actually? So it's called Reclaiming Magic, can you elaborate a bit more on that title?

**YS:** First of all I want to diversify the Royal Academy, that exhibition, to encourage people from a diverse culture to enter. There will be a number of self-taught artists. Have you heard of Bill Traylor?

**YI:** I haven't, no.

**YS:** Write him down and look him up. He was born into slavery and kind of reflected the African-American life quite well, but he was self-taught and didn't go to art school. I want him to be the kind of central artist for the Summer Exhibition. But also, often magic within Western Art history has been looked down on as primitive, ethnic. But, if you look at a lot of contemporary art by African diaspora artists there's Afro-Futurism, which is a bit like a magic as well. Then there are artists with incredible works that do not fit into the Western canon, and also Western artists making incredible pieces but they haven't been to art school and they're not accepted. That's why I titled it Reclaiming Magic, it's to encourage different kinds of artists to apply.

**YI:** I think it's going to be a big year for art. Everyone is going to be so excited to be out again. I am very excited to see what happens, to see how everyone responds. The last thing I wanted to ask you for is advice. I used to work in Marks & Spencers, maybe ten years ago, and I served Tracy Emin and asked for advice on what I should do. She told me to take my time, to not rush having my first show and build my body of work. What would be your advice?

**YS:** Well, I mean I think the best advice I can give is to always look at other artist's works, you learn from that. Go to as many exhibitions as you can because by seeing other people's work, you can position yourself. Even seeing what you don't want to do is a great thing as well. I think that's how you learn.

**YI:** Thank you Yinka, thank you so much. You really are one of my favourite artists, to get the chance to speak to you is a blessing.