

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Evening Standard
Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2021 review: exuberance abounds
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It's never easy to fully refresh this behemoth of an annual show, but co-ordinator Yinka Shonibare has done a fantastic job



Image: David Parry/Royal Academy of Arts

Even amid wars and pandemics, the Royal Academy finds a way to fit in its annual pro-and-amateur artist jamboree. It has run continuously since 1769; last year it got pushed to the autumn for its short-lived run, and here it is again: welcome to the “Summer” Exhibition, number 253.

This year's show is coordinated by the artist Yinka Shonibare and is hewn in the image of his sculptural work, attempting to question historical injustices and to do so with abundant joy in the creation of art, using materials previously dismissed as decorative or secondary – Shonibare's satirical and playful works often use batik, a textile with a complex geopolitical history.

And he delivers on his promises. After the first two rooms of last year's Summer Exhibition were given to Black artists, I wrote that the equitable display of artists “should be a manifesto, not a one-off.” It wasn't a one-off: there are noticeably more works by artists of colour and the sheer number of portraits of Black people compared to an average Summer Exhibition is striking.

Shonibare has also invited international Black artists to contribute. Betye Saar is here, with *Red Ascension* (2011), a ladder between whose rungs is a narrative sequence: successively, an African mask, boats, chains, a dagger and a crescent moon and stars. Ellen Gallagher's *Elephantine* (2019) is another stand-out: a map of Africa with an elephant head embedded within, almost like a skull, and poles holding it up with the colours of the Belgian flag. It was made after Gallagher had researched Belgian colonial atrocities in the Congo. Other notable invitees include another US artist, Nari Ward, and the Beninese sculptor Romuald Hazoumè.



Image: Installation view/Royal Academy of Arts

Shonibare's quest to broaden the materials used by artists in the show is visible too: works in quilt, crochet and ceramic – materials which might have been dismissed as “craft” in earlier generations – are more numerous than I can remember. The exuberance in making art that Shonibare seeks is palpable.

But while you can change some elements of this art-world behemoth, many of its ills are immutable: too much work – close to 1,400 this time; prominent works by Royal Academicians who have been making effectively the same painting repeatedly for 30 years; and works submitted by amateur artists that are so terrible you have no idea how the committee let them through. Still, it wouldn't be the Summer Exhibition without them.