

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Guardian

'This has never been so much fun!': Royal Academy Summer Exhibition review

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What – where is all the mediocre art? Yinka Shonibare has turned this annual event into a thrilling, thoughtful showcase boasting giant fruit and Colston in chains.



Image: A hilarious, imaginative rebirth... the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition. Photograph: David Parry/ © Royal Academy of Arts

The statue of Sir Joshua Reynolds, founder of the Royal Academy, is usually garlanded with flowers when the Summer Exhibition is on. This year the bronze figure in the courtyard wears instead a sash of Dutch wax print, the fabric of complex colonial histories that British Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare has made his trademark. As coordinator of this year's show,

Shonibare starts as he means to go on – not so much denouncing the establishment as tricking it, getting it to see things his way and leaving it more radically transformed than if he'd actually toppled Sir Joshua.

Let's not sentimentalise history. The RA was founded in 1768, bang in the middle of Britain's most profitable engagement in the transatlantic slave trade, by artists happy to portray slavers. So there's historical justice in the revolution Shonibare enacts in the grand salons of Burlington House. He exacts retribution with a smile and blows up ingrained inequality with the kindest of explosives. Everyone will leave happy – and changed.

The thrill is not just social – it is artistic. The RA show is so big. Most years I walk through it with a mounting boredom and claustrophobia, senses dulled by acres of mediocre art. Shonibare's shift uncovers new worlds of talent and imagination. He makes you see with new eyes. He begins by introducing the African American artist Bill Traylor, who died in 1949. It is an inclusion that reverses time and twists space.



Image: Rose Wylie's pineapple. Photograph: David Parry/© Royal Academy of Arts

You think this exhibition is about British art in 2021? But we are made by history. Traylor didn't get any RA dinners. He was born into slavery in Alabama in 1854. Towards the end of his long life, he started making intense and comic paintings such as *Untitled (Construction With Figures)*, in which people dance, shout and struggle round a tower on which birds and animals perch. He resembles Paul Klee in the surreal mystery of his designs. *Red Man With Pipe* depicts a bent and ancient figure, a dogged survivor. Maybe it's a self-image.

Clearly, the prominence given to an artist who's been dead more than 70 years goes against everything anyone expects the RA Summer Exhibition to be. But the more you think about it, the more necessary the gesture is. A restitution is made. Nearby hangs Hew Locke's *Colston Day 1*, a photo of the Bristol slaver's pre-toppled monument that Locke has plastered with wire, cloth and paint to change Colston into a golden-haired totem in chains. Shonibare promises "magic" and Victor Ehikhamenor delivers it with a towering assemblage called *The Holy King from the Sky*, a being clad in red lace against blackness, festooned with rhinestones and rosaries. Lu Mason's *Magician*, meanwhile, is a jester running through space, woven from wool and hessian.

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The real magic is how Shonibare has infused the entire RA with his ideas. In the works in the next room, chosen by Humphrey Ocean, the riot continues – and the established artists take part in destroying the establishment. In one lovely juxtaposition, a gorgeously wet and shiny red painting by Gary Hume hangs by a little canvas of a toad.



Image: Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

As you go further through the show, the sense of democracy expands. It is not just about who makes art but what we define as artistic excellence. One work that stopped me in my tracks was a gigantic painted ceramic pineapple by Rose Wylie. This 87-year-old may be an Academician and art-world darling but she has the raw joyful energy of an outsider artist. Another great and venerable artist who makes paintings that seem to grow from rubbish is Frank Bowling: his pulsing purple canvas Lovelock's Whole Earth is covered with melted goo and has what look like condoms stuck in its sleazily beautiful surface. It is genius.

There's nothing pious about this funny, happy show. If you were trying to impose a liberal orthodoxy, you probably wouldn't let pop porn master Allen Jones anywhere near the place. But love it or loathe it, his 3D painting of a naked woman bursting from the streets of Shoreditch in London is one of the most unforgettable things here. And isn't Jones also making a monument to marginality?

This exhibition makes you think. There are so many good things. In fact, all 1,382 exhibits are worth looking at. For me, though, the best of all is Shonibare's Unintended Sculpture (Donatello's David and Ife Head). It crowns the exhibition with its fusion of the body of a Renaissance masterpiece and a great work from medieval Africa: a hilarious, mind-blowing manifesto for the imaginative rebirth he leads here. Two artistic traditions at their height collide – and create something new. The Summer Exhibition has never been so much fun. And it has never been so serious.