

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Glossary

Reclaiming Magic: Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition 2021

Amah-Rose Abrams

16 September 2021



## Reclaiming Magic: Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition 2021

Yinka Shonibare's impressive show focuses on diversity and inclusivity, resulting in an exhibition that feels more uplifting and unified than ever

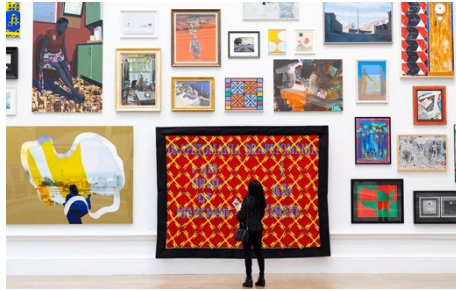


Image: Installation View

It might be a little later than usual, kicking off in the last week of September rather than its regular June slot, but there's no doubt that the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition has been worth the wait. Co-ordinated by celebrated YBA and Academician Yinka Shonibare, over 1,300 works have been selected by an even wider range of artists than usual – from marginalised creatives to the self-taught and those with disabilities – in

keeping with the show's theme, 'Reclaiming Magic'. Shonibare and the Royal Academy's chief executive Axel Rüger share their insight into what is surely one of the RA's most inclusive and joyful Summer Exhibitions to date.

Walking through the forecourt of the Royal Academy I am struck by a bright orange, patterned sash draped over the shoulder of its founding president Sir Joshua Reynolds. Is this a nod to the statue debate? Certainly, it catches the attention at the entrance of this year's Summer Exhibition which, after a year's hiatus, is back, albeit in the Autumn. Co-ordinated by Academician Yinka Shonibare, the show is based around the theme 'Reclaiming Magic' with a remit of increased diversity across the board.



Image: Installation View

"First of all, it's about artists actually being able to work viscerally and from their own instinct," says Shonibare, laying out his vision for the Summer Exhibition in a statement for the RA. "It's important not to inhibit the creative process. The second part is the general perception of magic, or ideas around magic which are perceived as being foreign to western ideas and western enlightenment culture. The term has connotations of dubiousness, unseriousness, of child's play and the occult.

"This exhibition seeks to transcend a Western art history perspective to focus on the transformative powers of the magical in art, and a return to the visceral, joyful aspects of art-making," he continues.

As coordinator, Shonibare put together a committee of fellow Academicians who had the task of jointly going through the 14,000 submissions from which they selected 800 works; the rest of the show is made up of invited artists. A commercial exhibition, pieces are priced from £50 upwards meaning that most people attending could potentially take home one of the 1,383 works.

In something of this scale, diversity should surely be achievable but as the art world goes through a period of adjustment when it comes to representation, when an institution or figure claims diversity it is certain to come under scrutiny.

"Yinka really wanted to look at the aspects of making art beyond the western canon and our Western traditions," explains Axel Rüger, Secretary and Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Shonibare's approach. "He's Nigerian British and so he particularly focused on artists from Africa, from the African diaspora, Afrofuturism but also artists with disabilities, with

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learning difficulties, and other sort of challenging circumstances who otherwise might not have that much access to the established art world."



Image: Bill Traylor

The result is a show which, despite its size and the fact it includes work by untrained artists alongside those who can regularly command hundreds of thousands of pounds for their pieces, feels more unified than usual. The first room, curated by Shonibare, sets the tone with the inclusion of a series of works by a late artist who was born as a slave and didn't start painting until he was 85. Bill Traylor's simple, surreal figures are given their own red wall setting and are the first thing you see on entering, stopping me in my tracks.

"The touchstone of the exhibition is the work by Bill Traylor," says Rüger. "Which is sort of an anomaly for us, because normally we only show artists who are alive and whose work is no less than five years old and that does not apply to Traylor but for Yinka it was really essential and the springboard or inspiration for the show."



Image: Amoako Boafo © Matt Humphrey

Other artists on display range from Bob and Roberta Smith, Tracey Emin and Ellen Gallagher to rising stars like Ghanaian artist Amoako Boafo, famous for his glorious portraits, and Kinshasa-based Eddy Kamuanga, who maps out the skin of his subjects like circuit boards referencing the horrific trade in precious minerals used to make mobile phones in the Congo, and whose work features on the Exhibition poster.

True to its intentions, the show is diverse not only in terms of race and nationality but also in terms of training, accessibility and neurodiversity with a wide range of styles, media and subject matter on display. You see a visceral Anselm Kiefer, for example, alongside a pineapple by Rose Wylie. Personal favourites include the surreal Afrofuturist photography of Alexis Peskine in *Aljana Moons II* and the huge, humorous painting which relocates part of East London to the South of France, *Bethnal Green and Mont Blanc* by Jock MacFadyen RA.



Image: Eddy Kamuanga, Ilunga

Shonibare wanted to give a platform to those who aren't usually seen in an institution like the Royal Academy and in doing so raise the bar at which they are appreciated by both the art world and the public. And so, you see self-taught artist Johnson Weree's series of drawn faces included, with their curved lines and enticing palette, and several emotive fabric sculptures and wall works by 'outsider artist' Marie-Rose Lortet.

There is an explosion of colour in the rooms selected by artist Eva Rothschild, which are filled with every interpretation of sculpture and painting from a figure standing proud at the entrance by Shonibare to felt artist Lucy Sparrow's brightly hued condiments.

The overall sense throughout this year's Summer Exhibition is one of joy and inspiration, not just in the curation but also in the fact that it heralds hope and a sense of a slowly returning to normality. We never know what the future will hold but a wide ranging, diverse show for our post-pandemic London feels as good as it sounds.