

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Week
Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2021 – what the critics are saying
The Week Staff
7 October 2021

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'Refreshing' show curated by Yinka Shonibare CBE RA brings together 1,382 works created in every medium.



Image: Royal Academy

The Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition has been staged every summer since 1769 – and seldom, in recent years, has it provided many memorable experiences, said Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian*. "Most years I walk through it with a mounting boredom and claustrophobia, senses dulled by acres of mediocre art." So this year's joyous new iteration of the event (shunted to the autumn by the pandemic) could hardly be more of a surprise.

Under the theme of "Reclaiming Magic" and curated by the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE, it is a "riot" of brilliant pictures, entertaining juxtapositions and – most remarkably – grown-up explorations of Britain's imperial past. The show brings together 1,382 works created in every medium, and as always, submissions from the public hang side by side with contributions from famous artists.

It should be chaotic, but somehow Shonibare has "infused the entire RA with his ideas", selecting many works that explore and question the resonances of European imperialism. Yet there's "nothing pious" about it; on the contrary, the tone is exuberant.

Crowning the show is Shonibare's 'Unintended Sculpture (Donatello's David and Ife Head)', which fuses the body of a Renaissance masterpiece with the head of a great work from medieval Africa – a "manifesto for the imaginative rebirth he leads here". The Summer Exhibition "has never been so much fun".



Image: Royal Academy Summer Exhibition

This year's exhibition is "full of fighting spirit", said Alastair Sooke in *The Daily Telegraph* – and determined to champion "previously invisible" artists. The first thing we see is a wall of "spindly silhouetted figures" by the African American artist Bill Traylor (1853-1949), who was born into slavery and taught himself how to paint and draw in his late 80s.

"The legacy of slavery" is everywhere: the British sculptor Hew Locke's *Colston Day 1* is a photo of the sculpture of the Bristol slave trader Edward Colston before it was toppled, covered with "chains and colourful cloth". One whole room is devoted to John Akomfrah's "melancholic" video installation about the African diaspora.

While Shonibare's "takeover" of this normally staid fixture is genuinely "refreshing", it's not flawless: as ever, there are pictures with "trite" titles like *Almost Spring* and many forgettable works, including some "workaday tributes" to the late Captain Tom Moore.

Perhaps the most disappointing contributions come from the more established artists, said Rachel Campbell-Johnston in *The Times*. Works by the likes of Anselm Kiefer and Allen Jones are "predictable" at best. Yet the show's enthusiastic embrace of "cultural diversity" is infectious – from photographer Barney Cokeliss's striking

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photograph of a Sowetan boy, to Shonibare's own brightly coloured textile and collage works. The general mood is "cheery and improvisatory".

Even the public submissions are better than normal, with "eye-catching and amusing" works including a painting by a robot, and a "Boris Johnson voodoo doll" titled Please Enter Your Pin. You'll leave feeling that Shonibare must have "thrown a bit of magic into the mix" to create such an entertaining exhibition.