

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

New Internationalist  
Spotlight: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA  
Subi Shah  
21 December 2021

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The acclaimed – and playful – sculptor Yinka Shonibare CBE impresses on Subi Shah his love for cultural exchange.



Image: Yinka Shonibare CBE. Photo by David Parry/© Royal Academy of Arts

Celebrated British Nigerian sculptor Yinka Shonibare CBE is best known for his work exploring colonialism and post-colonialism within the context of globalization. Shonibare's oeuvre examines race, class and the construction of cultural identity, through incisive commentary on the tangled interrelationship between Africa and Europe.

Catching up with Shonibare via video conferencing, he first wants to know a bit more about me. I explain that, like him, I was born in London and my family moved to Nigeria when I was an infant, before returning. We agree there are many similarities between our cultures, one being a huge emphasis on going into 'The Professions' – Medicine/Law/Science. I ask him, 'How did your family react when you "came out" as an artist? How on Earth did you get away with it?'

He roars with laughter. 'Well, to be honest, it helped that my elder brother is a surgeon, a urologist actually, who did the first kidney transplant in Nigeria. My big sister is a very successful dentist. My younger brother is an international banker, so that took the heat off me a bit!'

'Limiting cultural expression by stopping who is "allowed" to be inspired by what is, in my opinion, philistine. Cultural exchange is deeply important to me.'

I ask what his first experiences of Art were. 'There was so much creative energy in 1970s Africa. Artists like the late Ben Enwonwu (a Nigerian painter and sculptor), really captured my attention. I think the 1970s were much more culturally inclusive, there was more cultural activism and awareness. African pride was strong – global superstars like Fela Kuti, Muhammad Ali, Stevie Wonder all came. The global movement for black civil rights was very strong in Nigeria, right through apartheid, so when international festival Festac '77 brought black artists, musicians, dancers, scholars and writers from 47 countries across the world to Lagos, I felt so proud and so inspired to keep rebelling!'

'I was always in some sort of trouble. Back then in Nigeria, children at school would be caned and I got more beatings than anybody else for being disobedient, but it did not work! My choice to go into the Arts did initially cause a rift between myself and my father, a lawyer, but then I took a job with Shape, an arts charity that works with people who have disabilities – something very close to my heart, as I use a wheelchair to get around. Anyway, this meant I got a salary while I was working as an artist. Then my work was recognized with a CBE, so I was invited to Windsor Castle and my father, was very pleased indeed. I heard him on the phone to Nigeria boasting that the Queen had invited him to a party at her castle! My father could relax completely then, because I was doing what I loved and also making money, buying my own home... The whole Nigerian thing is based on fear: economic independence is everything, I think especially when you have a disability.'

Yinka pauses. 'It made me sad because I didn't go into Art for money... I didn't think much about what I was going to do for a living, all I wanted to do was explore certain ideas and that seemed more important to me than financial gain.'

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Shonibare was given the huge task of co-ordinating the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition 2021. Founded in 1768, at the height of England's lucrative involvement with the African slave trade, the Royal Academy is an

institution which has honoured slavers through its exhibits. The sweet irony of Shonibare, an African artist, being given 'the run of the house' is not lost on me. The critics raved about the exuberant, riotous, witty and beautiful set of works he curated. With his signature African-Dutch batik prints draping its halls, the Royal Academy had never seen anything like it.

'I wanted to shake things up and show the works of artists who have been left out of the canon of Western art,' Yinka says. 'Artists from different parts of the world, self-taught artists, artists with disabilities, artists who stitch and knit. I wanted the exhibition to be as diverse as possible and to showcase a multiplicity of voices.'

'But,' I ask, 'where does embracing diversity and hybrid cultures end and cultural appropriation begin?'

Yinka looks at me sideways and smiles. I think he knows I am trying to get under his skin.

'Limiting cultural expression by stopping who is "allowed" to be inspired by what is, in my opinion, philistine. Cultural exchange is deeply important to me and to this end, I am building an international artists' residency space in Lagos, which will be completed in February 2022. It will be situated about two hours away from a farm I am cultivating for local produce, so the artists will be able to move between the rural and the city spaces. I want to encourage international artists to visit Nigeria via my Foundation.'