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2015.05.20 Wed, by Iona Whittaker

## “The World Has Become More Difficult to Represent”: an Interview with Yinka Shonibare

With his current exhibition at James Cohan in New York, the British-Nigerian artist and self-described “post-colonial hybrid” Yinka Shonibare MBE departs from themes of cultural identity which have characterized his work to date. He has employed materials as wide-ranging as painting (for which he originally trained), film, photography and performance, but is best known for figurative sculptures clothed in equally expressive printed fabrics. Shonibare, who was a Turner Prize nominee in 2004, and was awarded an MBE the same year, has risen to prominence with significant works including “How to Blow up Two Heads at Once” (2006)—a figurative sculpture which was part of the African Pavilion for the 52<sup>nd</sup> Venice Biennale in 2007 and “Gallantry and Criminal Conversation”—a large-sale installation featuring a suspended carriage and multiple figures for documenta 10 in 2002.

**Iona Whittaker:** Do you typically start out with a framework for a show to help you form the works, or is this a project you had had in mind for some time and were waiting for the right moment to execute?

**Yinka Shonibare:** It varies a lot—I don’t have a fixed way of doing it. Sometimes I get inspiration from the context. This show is happening in New York. I’m interested in issues around climate change and at that very location there was a flood in the galleries; there’s also rising sea levels, and so I took that as a starting point.

**IW:** Were any of your works stored there at the time?

**YS:** Luckily they had taken a lot of work out of the gallery; they were not as affected as the other galleries. They managed to remove a lot of valuable works from the premises.

**IW:** Can you tell me about the show itself in your own words, and how it will look in the gallery?

**YS:** It’s quite odd in a sense that you encounter quite gorgeous-looking ballerinas. There’s a degree of deception and metaphor because when you see ballerinas you wouldn’t necessarily be thinking about menacing gods. You might just think that they are beautiful ballerinas. But there is a tradition of artists drawing on images of ballerinas; of course Degas is a very well-known artist who did that. But of course, these ballerinas are Greek gods, and they have weapons as well. They have some things you might associate with gods like the lightning; then a few of them also have guns behind their backs; it’s something menacing. And I want deliberately to change their genders; Greek gods are male gods, and the ballerinas in the exhibition are female. Another side to the exhibition is the escape side; once we’ve destroyed the earth then there is the need to find other places to go to. So there’s an astronaut.

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Yinka Shonibare, "Refugee Astronaut", fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, net, possessions, astronaut helmet, moon, boots and steel baseplate, 208 x 93 x 90 cm, 2015..

**IW:** I wanted to ask you about that anomalous figure.

**YS:** Yes, I'm calling him a "refugee astronaut" so he has got all of his worldly possessions on his back and is seeking new oases. And there are two butterfly kids and that I guess is about metamorphosis and transformation; you might interpret that in different ways. They're going to transform themselves and fly away, or . . . I wanted this show to have

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a kind of poetic feel—a light feel as well as a dark underbelly so that on one hand you have comfort, and then you realize that these figures are not so pretty after all. The whole thing is quite menacing.

**IW:** It seems to be a fight and then a flight—both are inevitable and follow on from one another. I think what's menacing about it is perhaps this inevitability. There are beautiful and apocalyptic figures and an astronaut. It seems to say “Here are the portents and here is the displaced.” It's like a narrative, in a way.

**YS:** Yes. [*He considers for a moment*] The point really is not to make something that literal, but also to—I've become increasingly interested in the power of the imagination in my art and the poetry, as opposed to a literal illustration of politics.

**IW:** Right, or direct references.



Yinka Shonibare, “Rage of the Ballet Gods”, exhibition view at James Cohan.

**YS:** As you know, the world is becoming more violent, more nasty, with all these weather issues and war and so on. It's actually becoming more difficult to represent, I think. And then there is the competition for resources. And climate change doesn't necessarily help that process along. We will be short of water also, and those are difficult issues to deal with.

**IW:** Do you view your work with any sense of responsibility? I don't mean in terms of materials, I mean in terms of messages to people.

**YS:** Not necessarily, because I don't really want to be moral—I don't want it to be a kind of moral crusade. Art is a place, in a way, to escape to. And aspects of life are of course reflected in art. The point about art is that it does not replicate life directly.

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**IW:** It's a response, whatever form it may take.

**YS:** Yes, of course, and I don't ever negate the benefits of entertainment, either. For me that's not a bad thing at all.

**IW:** So if we look at this show and the theme of environmentalism, you're not putting it up there as a message. It's something more immediate as a response to what's going on. It's not something that's trying to project concern. I'm hearing something more instantaneous—a creative response to what simply "is".

**YS:** Yes, I guess it's a visual equivalent of a poem.

**IW:** Your work is highly conceptual in a lot of ways, but as you have mentioned and as is clear, it's also incredibly visual—it's theatrical, striking and memorable. I wondered how you go about distilling your ideas into these visual forms; how do you go about it and how do you approach the balance between the idea and almost the distraction of the beautiful materials you use.

**YS:** It can be incredibly difficult sometimes to actually come up with things; you have to constantly edit yourself and you often don't end up with the ideas that you started with. The problem with it really is mainly that we are in the 21st Century, so the world is full of clichés and everything has been done before. That is very difficult—how do you understand what's been done before, avoid clichés and produce complex works? I like to use fabric. I don't want to promote any kind of ideology in my work—either the left or the right—and that usually is the starting point for me not to be anybody's messenger. Within that, I try to do something that is complex but that is also rich enough to be understood from different angles.

**IW:** So you have the immediately visual, and then many more layers you wish to incorporate.

**YS:** Yes, absolutely, because it's important that it's not reduced to a form of journalism. After all, I trained as a painter, so I am very interested in form and aesthetics; I'm also very interested in ideas, concepts. The point is to marry those two things. Of course there are other issues, for example why I started using the fabrics and how those relate to my background. They have become a kind of signature—a language—my own kind of Esperanto, if you like.

**IW:** Earlier in your practice you were focused on language deriving from themes; it has proved an adaptable language, for example to these most recent works. Can you talk to us about its role in your current work?

**YS:** Yes, I mean, it's about trying to marry the historical and contemporary.

**IW:** It seems the case now that you marry a kind of ancient mythology with very contemporary issues; it does create a sort of narrative. But I wondered why you find this link particularly potent?

**YS:** Myth was there to explain things that we couldn't explain before science—after all, Greek mythology is pre-Enlightenment, so science has explained a lot of things to us. But I feel value in folklore, I think, because folklore is tradition. I don't think folklore can be disregarded or dismissed offhand. I think it's a vital part of human culture. To return to folklore is important for the present; I think we have lost something in the over-emphasizing of the enlightened and the scientific.

**IW:** The rational.

**YS:** Yes, and I think that as result we lost a sense of community.

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**IW:** I would add that we tend to approach things in a news-like manner; we are subject to a constant barrage of news; perhaps our impression of the bigger picture or wider nuances is being distracted from or run over, as it were. It is something to do with how stories which can travel might be getting lost.

**YS:** Yes. I remember when I was young, growing up in Nigeria, I did experience older people telling us stories, and I used to listen very attentively to those stories; a lot of them are about the 'mischievous' ones. I used to enjoy those kinds of stories very much. I'm 52 years old—even Nigeria is very westernized now anyway, and it would be sitting in front of the TV, just watching soaps and things. Whereas I listened to grandparents telling me stories, and they are very memorable. I don't even know if that contributed to some of my interests later on in life—

**IW:** Your sculptural figures are not unlike storytellers—figures from which one might learn things.

**YS:** Yes, and in a funny kind of way, at this stage of my life I'm turning to folklore, fairytales and the imagination—those kinds of things. Whereas earlier in my career I think my work was very much embedded in post-modern theory and a lot of that kind of discourse around contemporary art. But I think I'm actually feeling a lot freer to explore other kinds of narratives now.

**IW:** Does it affect your feelings and response to your works when you see them displayed in the gallery, as opposed to in your studio?

**YS:** I think by the time an exhibition is up, the artist is in a different zone. You've moved on. In a way, for an artist, every exhibition is in past tense. You've got new thoughts.

**IW:** And what are you loyal to, always?

**YS:** I think it's always avoiding one-liners. I want the works, in themselves, to always retain a degree of complexity and to argue within themselves.

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Yinka Shonibare, "Ballet God (Apollo)", fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, lyre, sword, globe, pointe shoes and steel baseplate, 193 x 86 x 85 cm, 2015.



Yinka Shonibare, "Medusa North", digital chromogenic print, diameter, framed, 113.98 cm, 2015.



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Yinka Shonibare, "Ballet God (Zeus)", fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, lightning, gun, globe, pointe shoes and steel baseplate, 236 x 155 x 140 cm, 2015.



Yinka Shonibare, "Rage of the Ballet Gods", exhibition view at James Cohan.

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Yinka Shonibare, "Ballet God (Poseidon)", Fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, trident, dagger, globe, pointe shoes and steel baseplate, 209 x 221 x 90 cm, 2015.



Yinka Shonibare, "Rage of the Ballet Gods", exhibition view at James Cohan.