

Artist Yinka Shonibare Makes a Move to the Barnes Foundation

Once known as an art-world provocateur, the artist has taken on the Enlightenment and the power of knowledge as themes behind a project place for emerging talent and a solo show at Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation—the museum's first contemporary commission in over 80 years

By CAROL KINO
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BRIGHT OUTLOOK | Shonibare in his London studio, with sculptures featuring his signature batik cloth. *Photography by James Mollison for WSJ. Magazine*

ON A GLOOMY WINTER afternoon, the conceptual artist Yinka Shonibare sits in his wheelchair in his cozy East London studio, mulling over some sculptures that arrived unexpectedly from a fabricator that morning—two ten-foot-high library ladders and a model of a coffee-colored young girl garbed in a Victorian frock made from African batik cloth. They are propped against the only empty wall in the art-crammed space, opposite a desk piled with colorful fabric scraps and magazine

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clippings, where he normally makes collages. Nearby, three female assistants sit quietly at their desks, fielding a stream of emails and requests. From the floor below arises something less typical: the sound of African drums, as a musician warms up for a performance in the emerging artists' project space Shonibare runs downstairs.

The ladders and the mannequin are part of a new piece he is creating for "Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders," his solo show at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, which opens this January. The museum has sent a publicist and a film crew to the studio to record him talking about the show and the new work. But Shonibare, normally gentle and easy-going, is strenuously resisting the idea of allowing the unfinished elements to be photographed, even if they only appear in the background of a shot. "They're just leaning against the wall," he insists in his lilting West African accent. "It's not the artwork, actually."

The ladders—their rungs made from facsimiles of books—are intended to soar into the air apparently unsupported, as child-size figures, each with a globe where its head should be, clamber up to the sky. The point, Shonibare explains, is to promote the feeling that "you're moving beyond your own limits by acquiring knowledge"—a gravity-defying ascent that couldn't possibly be conveyed by something leaning against a wall.

It's easy to see why an emblem of unfettered achievement might matter to this British-Nigerian artist, who has built a dazzling career despite being disabled—the result of a spinal cord inflammation contracted in his teens, which for a time rendered him completely paralyzed. But accomplishment alone isn't why the Barnes tapped him for the show and asked him to create a new sculpture—the museum's first contemporary commission since its founder and namesake, Albert C. Barnes, hired Matisse to create a mural in 1930. "I was very interested in Yinka's interest in education," says Judith F. Dolkart, the museum's chief curator. "And both he and Barnes have anti-establishment streaks."

Barnes, who died in 1951, was famously contrarian, refusing entry to most of the art-going public and insisting that his holdings be shown exactly as he'd installed them (a written stipulation stating as much led to a lengthy legal battle before the museum could be relocated, controversially, from Lower Merion to downtown Philadelphia in 2012). But he was also devoted to education, opening his doors to young artists, holding classes for his factory workers and using his collection to develop his own approach for teaching art appreciation, which involved creating exhibition groupings that mixed decorative objects with African sculptures and European works. The 19 pieces selected for Shonibare's show refer to Barnes's legacy in some fashion: They include sculptures of children reading books and peering through telescopes, and an installation called *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996–97), a period room whose walls and furniture are upholstered with African-style fabric the artist designed himself.

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"Yinka's work proposes alternative histories," says Dolkart, "and Barnes himself had a kind of alternative history of collecting and displaying his work."

When Shonibare, 51, made his name in the mid-1990s, he wasn't the first person one would have associated with a venerable American museum. Together with other Young British Artists like Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst, he started out as an *enfant terrible*, known for sculpture, photographs and films that feature aristocratic-looking figures outfitted in Victorian clothing fashioned from African textiles—work that investigates post-colonial African identity while also implying, in an exuberantly decorative and playful fashion, that the colonizers have been subsumed by the people they set out to rule.

After finishing his master of fine arts degree at Goldsmiths College in 1991, his first sculpture, *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1995)—three headless female mannequins, suggesting a decapitated version of the three graces—was snapped up by Charles Saatchi. The piece was later included in the collector's controversial 1997 "Sensation" show in London, alongside Chris Ofili's painting of the Virgin Mary decorated with elephant dung, which so incensed Mayor Rudolph Giuliani when it arrived at the Brooklyn Museum in 1999 that he threatened to terminate the institution's funding. Shonibare then cast himself as the protagonist of *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, a 1998 photography series based on William Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* paintings, with white actors playing his servants and acolytes.

But the work that really launched Shonibare internationally was *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002), first shown at the Documenta art exhibition in Germany. It involved five groupings of elaborately garbed mannequins engaged in different forms of sexual congress amid piles of luggage—a debauched version of that great European rite of passage, the Grand Tour. Since then, Shonibare has had solo museum shows on almost every continent. In 2004, he was nominated for a Turner Prize, after which [Prince Charles](#) appointed him a Member of the Order of the British Empire, or MBE. Despite his apparent anti-establishmentarianism, Shonibare gleefully embraced the title, appending it to his name for shows and projects and once using the acronym YS MBE as a logo in his work. "It's tongue in cheek," says the London dealer [Stephen Friedman](#), who has represented him since the beginning. "On the one hand Yinka likes to be seen as part of the establishment. On the other, he often makes fun of himself by maintaining his title as part of his signature."

Or, as Shonibare himself says, gazing out impishly from beneath his dreadlocks, "I like the establishment and I like to be rebellious. I am not a prisoner of political ideology."

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Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, 2010, was first shown on the Fourth Plinth of London's Trafalgar Square, a public space dedicated to showing contemporary artworks. *Photography by James Mollison for WSJ. Magazine*

The son of a Nigerian lawyer, Shonibare was born in London and raised both there and in Lagos. "I'm the elite in Nigeria," he says. "Coming here, I didn't feel any different. But there is a perception that if you're of a totally different race, you're possibly of a different class." Still, his interests lay miles from the working-class consciousness of artists like Hirst and Emin; nor was he especially eager to contribute to the political-protest art prevalent among some black English artists at the time.

In art school, he happened on to a medium that focused his interests. Challenged by a teacher to produce a so-called "authentic African artwork," Shonibare visited a market in London to study what he'd always assumed to be African textiles, only to learn that the batiks were actually European: Since the mid-19th century they had been mass-produced in Holland, initially for the Indonesian market, and exported to Africa. "I found that more interesting than being authentic," he says. Their lush colors and patterns also offered Shonibare, known as something of a *bon vivant*, the opportunity to explore beauty and extravagance. "I didn't see aesthetic pleasure as purely a domain of the white male," he says. "I thought I could occupy that space while challenging it as well."

At first he incorporated the fabric into paintings, but when he began using it for sculpture, his work finally found its groove. "I then started to introduce other ideas," Shonibare says, "things from literature and current affairs. I wanted to amuse myself." While some pieces riffed on iconic artworks, like his re-imagining of Hogarth, others tackled historical subjects, like the 2003 tableau *Scramble for Africa* (also at the Barnes), which positions 14 headless mannequins around a

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map of Africa, mimicking the European rulers who partitioned the continent into colonies in the 19th century.

Over the years, Shonibare's political commentary, while still incisive, has often seemed subtler. Recently, he has focused on Enlightenment themes and figures, exploring both sides of a period known for the flowering of intellectual thought as well as colonialism and war. One piece, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* (2010), a scale rendering of the naval hero's flagship *HMS Victory* made for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, proved so popular that a public campaign was launched to buy it for the National Maritime Museum—despite the fact that its sails, printed like Shonibare's trademark fabric, slyly acknowledge Britain's part in the slave trade. And in 2008's *Age of Enlightenment* sculptures (three of which are at the Barnes), Shonibare presented some of the great 18th-century thinkers as disabled: Antoine Lavoisier, the French scientist who revolutionized chemistry before succumbing to the guillotine, is depicted in a wheelchair, like Shonibare himself. As his projects have grown more elaborate, Shonibare has kept his staff small, preferring to have only a handful of full-time employees and arranging for the work itself to be fabricated by independent contractors off-site. Fifteen sculptors, costumiers, globe-makers and other craftspeople worked on the Barnes commission, managed by Ailbhe Murphy, who oversees production on Shonibare's behalf. (As Emily Lennox, his studio manager, puts it, "Ailbhe is Yinka's eyes.")

Partly because his condition requires regular physical therapy, Shonibare spends only nine hours a week in the studio—a 1950s textile factory that he cannily snapped up after the 2008 financial crash. "Most of the thinking and idea for new bodies of work generally happen outside of this building," says Lennox, who points out that this usually is in the library of Shonibare's modest terrace house in nearby Mile End. (Although he resides there on his own, his 24-year-old son, a computer game designer based in Copenhagen, lived across the street until quite recently.)

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—Yinka Shonibare

Shonibare makes additional visits to the building for Guest Projects, the artists' program that occupies the bulk of its space. Originally he had intended to tear it down and put up something new by a major architect, but then he realized that "buying bigger and better things doesn't necessarily add value. When you get to a certain stage in your career," he says, it's more rewarding to do "something intellectually stimulating." That decision has also given him a new role: Like Barnes, he is now an arts philanthropist.

The program he devised extends invitations to five collaborative groups a year, four chosen by a jury comprised of the previous year's lead artists and Shonibare, and one selected by Shonibare. Each spends about a month there, working on projects like an improvisatory music festival or a series of talks and films about the ways art and science interrelate. "Yinka's idea was to have this space where

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people could come together and exchange ideas around art," says Chloë Sylvestre, who coordinates the program. "It's a creative hub."

More recently, the studio launched Guest Projects Africa, dedicated to promoting avant-garde African art forms, from visual art and fashion to music and spoken word.

Although applicants apply by email, they must also deliver a hard copy—ideally in person, via the black letterbox that stands like a signpost by the front door. They also have to submit a budget and explain how they plan to raise money to cover utilities and other costs. "It's better to empower people a little," says Shonibare, who describes himself as "a social capitalist." Artists have to be entrepreneurial, he adds. "I think it should be part of one's education. It's a survival skill."

Guest Projects also runs a bimonthly supper club that's open to the public, where the work of a well-known artist is explored through performance and food. Last Halloween, the studio honored the German Dadaist and collage pioneer Kurt Schwitters. While a performance artist put Schwitters's absurdist poetry to music, guests were invited to build collages with the appetizers; later they were encouraged to make sculptures from porridge, as Schwitters did during his time in a British World War II internment camp. That evening, Shonibare seemed as intrigued and surprised as the other diners. "I learn every day from Guest Projects," he says the next day. "Yesterday, how much did I know about Kurt Schwitters? I consider that added value."

Similarly, Shonibare wasn't an expert on the Barnes Foundation when Dolkart first approached him (although he was aware of the controversy surrounding its relocation). After researching the man behind it, though, he saw a connection. "The revelation," Shonibare recalls, came when he realized that he and Barnes shared the same love of learning. "Barnes knew that education could emancipate people," he says. Barnes also appealed to him for another reason: He was a supporter of advancement and education for African Americans, integrating his workforce in a time of segregation and supporting organizations like the NAACP, the Urban League and Lincoln University, a historically black university near Philadelphia.

So when Shonibare sent his child-size mannequins scrambling up ladders made of books, allowing them to advance themselves through reading, he was reflecting Barnes's worldview as much as his own. "Barnes was very much a supporter of the idea that you could change your own situation by acquiring knowledge," he says. "And I wanted the essence of the man, what I felt he represented, somehow expressed through the art, through my eyes."

Photos: Artist Yinka Shonibare in His Space

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