

Milliard, Coline, "The Imperial Commoner: A Q&A With Yinka Shonibare, MBE," 16 December, 2010



LONDON— Three years ago, the acronym GSK didn't mean much to the British art world. How things have changed. Pharmaceutical giant **GlaxoSmithKline** has since then (and no doubt at vast expense) launched and given its name to **GSK Contemporary**, one of London's major shows during the holiday season. Held at the **Royal Academy**, it is now in its third year. After a promising and rather daring debut in 2008 — looking at the links between art, performance, and experimental theater — GSK Contemporary has settled for crowd-pleasing themed exhibitions, perhaps more to the taste of the RA's audience.

The 2009 edition was titled "Earth – Art of a Changing World" and showcased artists dealing with nature and/or ecology. This year's show tackles fashion. "Aware: Art Fashion Identity" examines, we are told, "clothing as a mechanism to communicate and reveal our identity." Of the 30 artists and designers featured — including [Yoko Ono](#), [Cindy Sherman](#), and [Andrea Zittel](#) — only two were commissioned to produce a new piece. Staple of the London art scene **Yinka Shonibare, MBE** is one of the two ([Hussein Chalayan](#) is the other). An hour before the private view of the exhibition, Shonibare spoke to **ARTINFO UK** about artistic challenges, colonialism, and curatorship.

How do you link visual art and fashion?

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

I don't link visual art and fashion. Curators have their own ideas about what your work is. For me it's not art, it's not fashion, it's just what I do. Curators come and give it a name. It's nice to have a job, you know. For me, it's just a job. I don't care what they call it, just give me the job.

Could you tell me about this new commission?

The piece is called "Little Rich Girls." It's composed of Victorian dresses, about 15 of them on a wall. The dresses have some sort of corset inside to give them volume and they are suspended from floor to ceiling. They are all made from African textiles, and the piece plays around with the idea of flash and wealth. There's a paradox: expensive clothing made of cheap material bought in the marketplace. There's also the intrinsic contradiction of the fabrics' manufacture. They are not really African, but Indonesian-influenced textiles produced by the Dutch for the African market. I really enjoy this.

It's not the first time that you've worked with period costume. What first attracted you to it?

As you know my background is Nigerian. I'm very interested in the whole colonial issue and the fact that my own identity is based on the British encounter with Nigeria. I'm speaking in English to you now purely for that reason. My work explores the history of colonialism and how that relates to my own hybrid identity.

You are a pure product of colonialism.

Absolutely, yes.

You've been using wax-printed cotton for years. Do you feel that your relationship to this material has changed over time?

It's not the only thing I do. Yes, I work with this fabric, but I also make photographs and sometimes I don't use the fabric at all. But I really enjoy working with it, from a purely aesthetic point of view.

What was the biggest challenge of this new commission?

There was no challenge, really. It's a very enjoyable thing to do at the Royal Academy. It's such an august institution! It's nice for a commoner like myself to be allowed through the doors of the academy.

You are an MBE [Member of the British Empire], you are not exactly a commoner, are you?

I'm a commoner with an MBE.