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Headless Bodies From a Bottomless Imagination

In his Victorian house in the East End here Yinka Shonibare, the British-Nigerian conceptual artist, perched on an exercise ball at the wooden table in his book-crammed study, sipping peppermint tea and examining a shipment of faux oysters on the half shell.

A stationary hand cycle sat beside him, an electric wheelchair across from him. One of Bob and Roberta Smith's slogan paintings, "Duchamp stinks like a homeless person," hung above him, and a tuna on toast prepared by his housekeeper was sandwiched between a vase of yellow tulips and a stack of Dante volumes: "Inferno," "Purgatorio" and "Paradiso."



It was a small tranquil moment in the midst of a whirlwind time for Mr. Shonibare, whose theatrically exuberant work, with its signature use of headless mannequins and African fabrics, will be featured in a major midcareer survey at the Brooklyn Museum starting Friday. The exhibition includes paintings, sculptures, large-scale installations, photographs and films.

Erudite and wide ranging, Mr. Shonibare, at 47, is a senior figure in the British art world but one who intentionally eludes easy categorization. A disabled black artist who continuously challenges assumptions and stereotypes — "That's the point of my work really," he said — Mr. Shonibare makes art that is sumptuously aesthetic and often wickedly funny. When he deals with pithy matters like race, class, disability, colonialism and war, he does so deftly and often indirectly.

"I don't produce propaganda art," he said. "I'm more interested in the poetic than the didactic."

On that gray May day in the East End, Mr. Shonibare was trying to decompress after directing a weeklong photo shoot that involved 25 live snakes, 14 nude models, 6 pigs and 2 lamb's heads. Inspired by Dante, Arthur Miller, Gustav Doré and the financial crisis, the shoot was a work in progress, "Willy Loman: The Rise and Fall," which seeks to depict what happens after the death of the salesman. (Hint: It's hellish.)

At the same time Mr. Shonibare was preparing for a trip to Jerusalem, where he is a guest curator at the Israel Museum. He was granting an hours-long interview, interrupted periodically by his plumber — "Do you happen to know where the stopcock is, mate?" — and he was evaluating the oysters for inclusion alongside a peacock with gilded beak in a 19th-century dinner party installation at the Newark Museum.

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“I’m juggling a few things, yeah,” said Mr. Shonibare, who in contrast to his bold and lavish work, is disarmingly gentle and restrained in person.

Because of a condition that left him partially paralyzed, Mr. Shonibare’s head lists to the right, as if being tugged there by a few of his jaunty dreadlocks. This often makes it look as if he were cocking his head to see things more clearly. But that impression is misleading because, as Arnold L. Lehman, director of the Brooklyn Museum, put it, his is the sure gaze of a “visionary” artist: “He’s able to juggle so many different ideas so brilliantly and to express them in such an immensely appealing and extraordinarily visual way.”

Mr. Shonibare is not without his critics in England. The London Evening Standard, for instance, has called his focus on cultural identity “labored, repetitive and a little last decade.” But his work is consistently requested for exhibition and purchase by museums around the world, according to his dealers, and he is rarely without a significant show or commission. The Brooklyn exhibition is his most comprehensive to date. Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, it will travel in November to the Museum of African Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. From July to January Mr. Shonibare’s dining room installation will be displayed at the Newark Museum.

Apart from Mr. Shonibare’s gallery, which is in the tony Mayfair area, his life is concentrated in the East End, which is gentrifying but still mixed. His drawing studio is there, as are the private club where he socializes, the warehouse that he is converting into an artists’ space, and his late-19th-century house. He lives alone, across the street from his 18-year-old son, Kayode, who is studying computer game design.

When Mr. Shonibare was about his son’s age and just starting at the Wimbledon College of Art, he felt faint one day and collapsed. Two weeks later he woke up in a hospital unable to move. The diagnosis was transverse myelitis, an inflammation across the spinal cord, and the prognosis was grim: complete paralysis.

The following year, in the hospital and a rehabilitation center, was “my bottom, bottom period,” he said. But gradually he regained considerable function, and after three years in a wheelchair, he once again walked (although he still sometimes uses a chair).

Most important to Mr. Shonibare in 1984 he was able to return to art school, this time the Byam Shaw School of Art in London, which offered some assistance.

“I found out that with a bit of help I was O.K.,” he said. “I could do most things.”

That Mr. Shonibare became a conceptual artist who delegates much of the production of his labor-intensive projects to a network of other artists is partly a result of his disabling illness. Another product, he said, has been a keen consciousness of his own mortality that has made him more appreciative of beauty.

The seminal moment in Mr. Shonibare’s artistic formation, however, was kindled by an encounter at Byam Shaw during a period when he was “making art about Perestroika.”

One day his tutor confronted him. “Why are you making work about Perestroika?” the tutor, a white Briton, asked. “You are African, aren’t you? Why don’t you make authentic African art?”

At first Mr. Shonibare was taken aback. “I tried to figure out what he meant by authentic African art,” he said. “I didn’t know how to be authentic. What would I do if I was being authentic?”

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Born in England in 1962 when his father was studying law there, Mr. Shonibare was raised biculturally. His family returned to Nigeria when he was 3 but kept a house in South London, where he spent summers. Mr. Shonibare grew up in Lagos singing “London Bridges” and watching “Sesame Street.” He spoke Yoruba at home, English at school. He felt privileged, not disadvantaged.

“I didn’t feel inferior to anyone,” he said, adding, with a laugh, “If anything, I felt they were inferior to me.”

But the tutor saw him as “someone of African origin, and there are things associated with that,” Mr. Shonibare said. “I should have actually understood all along that there is a way in which one is perceived, and there’s no getting away from it. And I realized that if I didn’t deal with it, I would just be described forever as a black artist who doesn’t make work about being black.”

Right then, Mr. Shonibare said, he found his artistic *raison d’être*. “I realized what I’d really have to deal with was the construction of stereotypes, and that’s what my work would be about.”

In search of authentic African-ness Mr. Shonibare visited an African fabric shop in the Brixton market in South London, discovering, to his amazement, that the best African fabric was actually manufactured in the Netherlands and exported to Africa. Further, the Dutch wax prints, as they are known, were originally inspired by Javanese batiks.

This idea, that a fabric connoting African identity was not really African, delighted the budding conceptual artist. “The material was the idea,” he said. From that point forward the African fabric was his medium and his message.

He used it first as his canvas — stretching the prints, then painting on them — and later to make his costumes, which are usually Victorian, the Victorian era being the period of British history when Africa was colonized, thus providing him not only with ruffles and bustles but also with what he called the “lovely irony” of contrasting fabric and style.

“My tutor wanted me to be pure African,” Mr. Shonibare said “I wanted to show I live in a world which is vast and take in other influences, in the way that any white artist has been able to do for centuries.” Mr. Shonibare came of age artistically in the 1980s, during the heyday of the Afro-Caribbean BLK Art Group, whose fierce work protested the perceived racism of the British art world. But Mr. Shonibare, living comfortably in his parents’ house in London, felt no kinship with them.

“I had nothing to be angry about,” he said.

For that matter, Mr. Shonibare, a born contrarian, was not constitutionally designed to belong to any art movement, not even the one with which he was associated by circumstance, the Young British Artists. Like them he attended Goldsmiths College (after Byam Shaw), overlapping for a time with Damien Hirst, the most prominent of the group. And like them Mr. Shonibare got his big break from the collector Charles Saatchi.

In the mid-1990s, at a time when Mr. Shonibare was supporting himself by working at a disability arts organization, Mr. Saatchi bought two of his pieces, for what the artist then considered an astronomical sum — about £8,000 (about \$13,000 today) each. Mr. Shonibare estimates their current value as “in the six figures;” one is now in the Museum of Modern Art’s collection.

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The other, “Double Dutch” (1994), shows one way that Mr. Shonibare adjusted creatively to his physical limitations. He could not handle huge canvases. So in “Double Dutch” he fragmented a large work into manageably sized pieces — 50 rectangles of African fabric — and arranged them in a 10-by-20-foot grid, incorporating the wall, painted an intense pink, into the artwork.

Because of Mr. Saatchi, Mr. Shonibare was included among the Young British Artists in the “Sensation” exhibition in 1997 — the show that, when it moved to the Brooklyn Museum, so provoked Rudolph W. Giuliani, the New York mayor, with a black Madonna adorned with elephant dung that he threatened to cut the museum’s funds.

But Mr. Shonibare was not himself a shock artist. He was not, like Mr. Hirst, suspending sharks in formaldehyde. Rather, at a time when decorative was a dirty word, he was making works of seductive beauty whose bite was only gradually felt.

Part of the bite lay in the headlessness of his mannequins, with the decapitation that is intrinsically violent but never made graphic. Mr. Shonibare said that he conceived of the headlessness as a joke related to the revenge killings of aristocrats in the French Revolution. “The idea of bringing back the guillotine was very funny to me,” he said.

Additionally, because Mr. Shonibare does not like his figures to be racially identifiable, chopping off their heads helps. (The fiberglass bodies are mixed race, “kind of coffee colored,” he said.)

This does not mean that race is invisible in his art. He himself is the centerpiece of a couple of his elaborately staged photographic works, like “Diary of a Victorian Dandy” (1998). Clearly identifying with the lead character as an outsider who gains entry to society through wit and style, Mr. Shonibare cast himself as a dandy who is fussed over in bed by white maids here, looked up to at a billiards table by white associates there.

In what he calls his “zeitgeist-inspired” art Mr. Shonibare prefers to set his pieces in a different historical era so as not to be hamstrung by unfolding events. In 2003, when he was thinking about American imperialism and the Iraq war, Mr. Shonibare made “Scramble for Africa.” In that large installation he positioned 14 headless — “and brainless” — men at a conference table adorned with the map of Africa, as if they were European leaders dividing up the continent in the late 1800s.

“It is possible,” he said dryly, “to learn from history.”

In his home on that day when Mr. Shonibare was supposedly decompressing, his studio manager, Ann Marie Peña, reviewed several pending matters with him, including details about the Willy Loman piece, which will be displayed at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London in September.

Ms. Peña showed him a photograph of the sculptor’s dummy for the “car crash Willy Loman,” the salesman — right after the death imagined for him — which will be positioned in a crashed vintage car at the entrance.

“Is his costume being distressed?” Mr. Shonibare asked.

“Distressed and sullied — and the shirt could be ripped,” Ms. Peña answered.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

“O.K.,” Mr. Shonibare said after a pause. “But I don’t want to be obvious. No blood or anything. And not too immaculate with the costume. He’s a man down on his luck. He can’t afford to keep the bling going.”

Over the last few years Mr. Shonibare’s stature as an artist has grown. He was short-listed for the Turner Prize, the prestigious British art award, and designated a member of the British Empire by Prince Charles (after which he promptly appended MBE to his name).

A constant demand for new work places continuous pressure on Mr. Shonibare’s network of collaborators — the sculptor, costume designer, photographer and others — whose assistance he sees as part of a historic and continuing tradition in artistic studios. “In my case I have a disability,” he said, “but Jeff Koons is physically fit, Damien Hirst is physically fit.”

Mr. Shonibare paused, then continued: “You know, all of the things that are supposed to be wrong with me have actually become a huge asset. I’m talking about race and disability. They’re meant to be negatives within our society. But they’re precisely the things that have liberated me. Because they are me, what I express. So it has not been a negative thing to be who I am but a positive thing.

“Do you know what I mean?”