

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Wyndham, Constance, "In the Studio: Yinka Shonibare, MBE," *Art & Auction*, February 2008

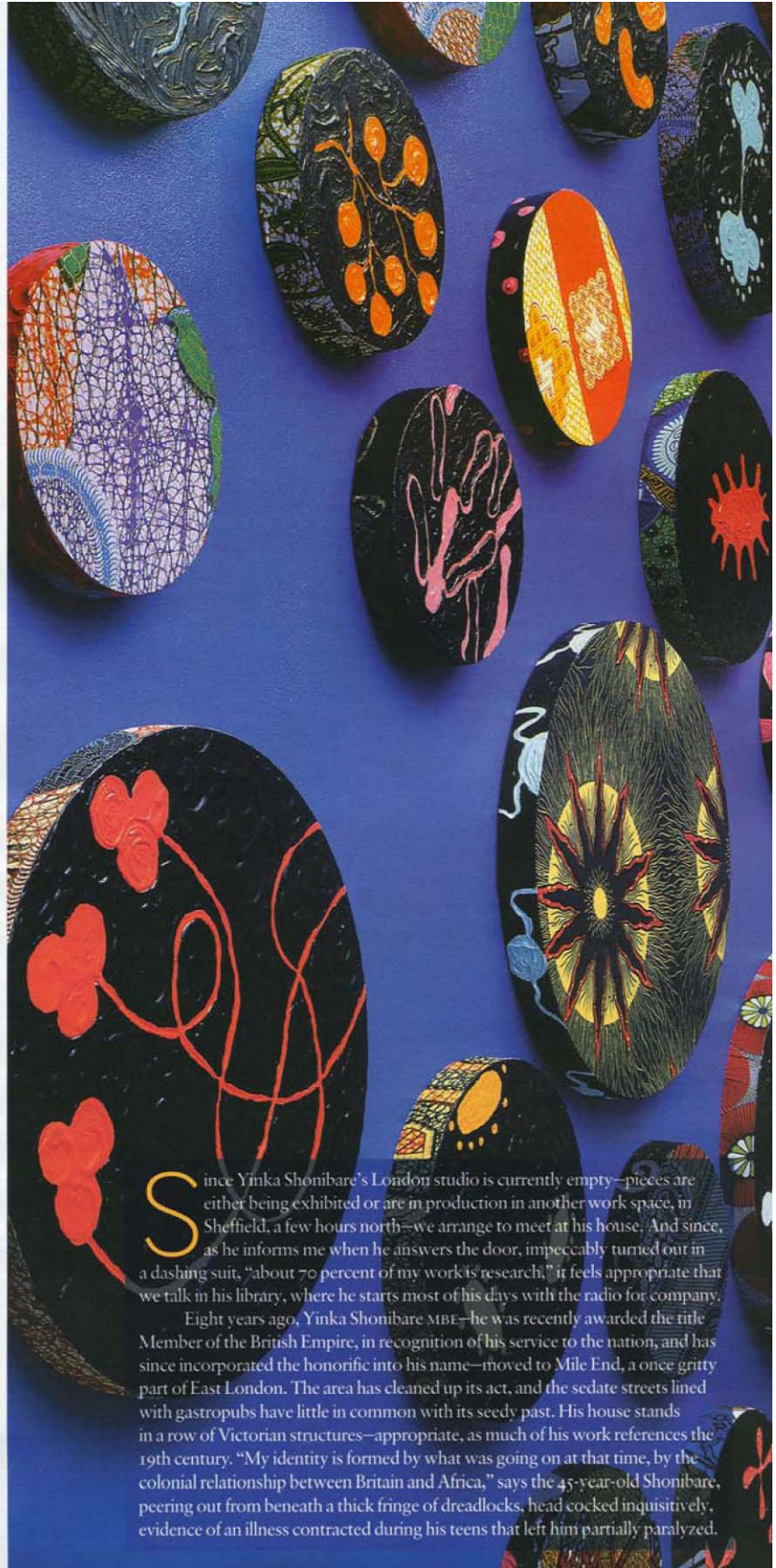
ART+
AUCTION



This page, from left: Stacks of the brightly colored Dutch wax fabric used by Yinka Shonibare in his work, and the artist, photographed in his East London house. A miniature version of the Victorian structure rests on the mantelpiece. Opposite: A detail of *Maxa*, a large-scale piece from 2003 that comprises 76 individual acrylic-on-textile panels.

YINKA SHONIBARE

THE ARTIST PROVOCATIVELY—AND BEAUTIFULLY—WEAVES TOGETHER HISTORY, AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IN HIS ELABORATE, WILLFULLY AMBIGUOUS TABLEAUX. BY CONSTANCE WYNDHAM PHOTOGRAPHS BY EILEEN PERRIER



Since Yinka Shonibare's London studio is currently empty—pieces are either being exhibited or are in production in another work space, in Sheffield, a few hours north—we arrange to meet at his house. And since, as he informs me when he answers the door, impeccably turned out in a dashing suit, “about 70 percent of my work is research,” it feels appropriate that we talk in his library, where he starts most of his days with the radio for company.

Eight years ago, Yinka Shonibare MBE—he was recently awarded the title Member of the British Empire, in recognition of his service to the nation, and has since incorporated the honorific into his name—moved to Mile End, a once gritty part of East London. The area has cleaned up its act, and the sedate streets lined with gastropubs have little in common with its seedy past. His house stands in a row of Victorian structures—appropriate, as much of his work references the 19th century. “My identity is formed by what was going on at that time, by the colonial relationship between Britain and Africa,” says the 45-year-old Shonibare, peering out from beneath a thick fringe of dreadlocks, head cocked inquisitively, evidence of an illness contracted during his teens that left him partially paralyzed.

IN THE STUDIO

In the library, Shonibare's favorite books are arranged on a shelf; many other volumes have been relegated to the basement. He is a voracious reader. Among his formative texts are Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and he talks about "rereading the canon"—Shakespeare, Dickens and others. "Rereading," he says, "has a double meaning: I am literally rereading the text while also reading it in relation to contemporary dilemmas."

Shonibare was born in England in 1962, was raised in Lagos, Nigeria, and moved back to London at age 17. He refers to himself as a "postcolonial hybrid." This duality informs his willfully ambiguous tableaux, in which life-size headless figures of uncertain origin are dressed in European-style costumes fashioned from pseudoethnic fabrics. They embody the notion that culture is as much a construct as any art object. The scenes created are often variations of those depicted in other artworks, such as portraits by Gainsborough or Fragonard's *Swing*, reproduced in a piece from 2001. The French Rococo artist's oeuvre was also the inspiration for Shonibare's *Garden of Love*, a multipart installation exhibited last June at the Musée du Quai Branly, in Paris, that presented viewers with romantic vignettes of couples surrounded by artificial flora and fauna.

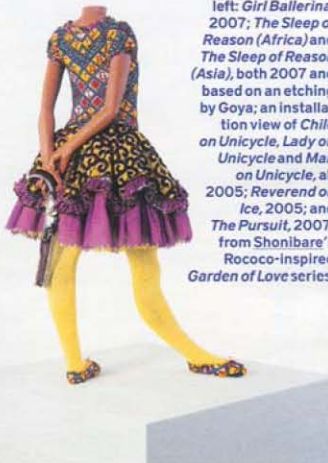
The materials Shonibare employs are also amalgams of influences. The fabric for his costumes, for example, may appear African but is, in fact, Dutch: The batik designs were originally created in the

19th century in Holland and manufactured in England for sale in Indonesia; when consumers there proved uninterested, the cloth was sold cheaply in West Africa and the U.K. It is still available, and Shonibare buys it at the Brixton market, in South London. He likes to challenge the notion of African authenticity. "I am interested in how we create labels," he explains.

After studying painting at London's Byam Shaw School of Art, Shonibare earned a master's degree at Goldsmiths. He soon became frustrated with what he calls painting's "limited scope," but he never abandoned the medium entirely. One of his best-known early pieces, *Double Dutch*, 1994, consists of 50 small works in which bright fabric replaces canvas as a support for the paint. A few years later, he began to cover various objects, such as bowls and a pair of women's shoes, with the fabric. Inspired by a visit to the costume department of London's Victoria & Albert Museum, he started using the textiles to make garments, which he initially suspended from the ceiling or draped on mannequins.

Shonibare's art earned him a Turner Prize nomination in 2004, but two years before that, his *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* made him the star at Documenta 10, in Kassel, Germany. The piece features a cast of elegantly dressed grandees bent toward »

Clockwise from near left: *Girl Ballerina*, 2007; *The Sleep of Reason (Africa)* and *The Sleep of Reason (Asia)*, both 2007 and based on an etching by Goya; an installation view of *Child on Unicycle*, *Lady on Unicycle* and *Man on Unicycle*, all 2005; *Reverend on Ice*, 2005; and *The Pursuit*, 2007, from Shonibare's Rococo-inspired *Garden of Love* series.



ART+AUCTION FEBRUARY 2008 | WWW.ARTINFO.COM

IN THE STUDIO

one another in compromising positions over suitcases and trunks. The headless figures (a reference to the aristocrats guillotined during the French Revolution), cavorting obliviously to their condition, are on the Grand Tour, the Continental journey required of well-bred 18th-century English men and women. These extended trips were intended to be educational, but it was understood that travelers indulged in certain sexual liberties between lessons on art and culture. Shonibare reveals the decadent aspects of the tour under its façade of privilege and sophistication.

Indeed, in all of Shonibare's art, darker facets of human nature seem to lurk below the luxurious surfaces. His message is never didactic, however. "My work doesn't take a moral viewpoint," he explains, but it does play on Europe's complicated relationship with its imperial past. Last year, in a commission for London's National Gallery to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, he positioned on pedestals two headless figures decked out in fancy dress and brandishing shotguns. Above this hunting party of two, a pheasant appeared to fall from the air, blown to smithereens. The punch line was the location: The tableau was installed in the National Gallery in the space usually displaying a Reynolds portrait of Colonel Tarleton, who opposed the abolition of the slave trade, and Johann Zoffany's depiction of Mary Oswald, whose husband owned plantations in the Americas.

This April, Shonibare will have a major show of new work at James Cohan Gallery. Cohan, who has been the artist's New York dealer since 2004 (he is repre-

sented by Stephen Friedman in London), was drawn to Shonibare after seeing *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* at Documenta. "It was a phenomenal piece," says Cohan. "It made me realize that Yinka is an artist of great intellect and wit." Cohan will present "Prospero's Monsters," a multipart exhibition inspired by Shakespeare's *Tempest* and Enlightenment ideas and people. Playing on the relationship between colonizer and colonized, it will feature vignettes of thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith and Antoine Lavoisier, all disabled in some way. Kant, for example, will be shown as an amputee, and others will have prosthetic limbs. The show will also include a series of five photographs based on Goya's etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* and shot on elaborate stage sets, plus a shipwreck scene based on the same 19th-century event that inspired Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*.

Shonibare works on his photographs, videos and paintings, as well as the concepts for his installations and costume designs, in his London studio; the figures are produced in the larger space in Sheffield, where they are cast in fiberglass resin using plaster molds made from clay models. Pieces are shipped back and forth to Shonibare »



Clockwise from above: *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, 2002, which debuted at Documenta 10; *How to Blow up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)*, 2006; the artist portraying himself in the photographs *Dorian Gray*, 2001, and *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 14.00 hours*, 1998; and *The Swing* (after Fragonard), 2001.



ART+AUCTION FEBRUARY 2008 | WWW.ARTINFO.COM

IN THE STUDIO

in London for vetting. His permanent team includes five regular assistants and some researchers; temporary helpers are recruited as needed for more-ambitious projects, of which there are an increasing number. His largest exhibition yet is planned for September, when the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney will present 12 years of his work in a survey show that will travel to the Brooklyn Museum, in New York.

When I meet with him, Shonibare is researching the American Revolution for a possible future project. A biography of patriot writer Mercy Otis Warren, a woman who participated in the American struggle for independence, lies open on a table in his library. I spot several copies of *Ladies of the Grand Tour* in the bookcase. Feminism has been a strong influence on him. "I drew inspiration from another historically oppressed group," says Shonibare. "As a student I saw a number of women and Black artists emerging into the mainstream, and it gave me the freedom to think that anything is possible."

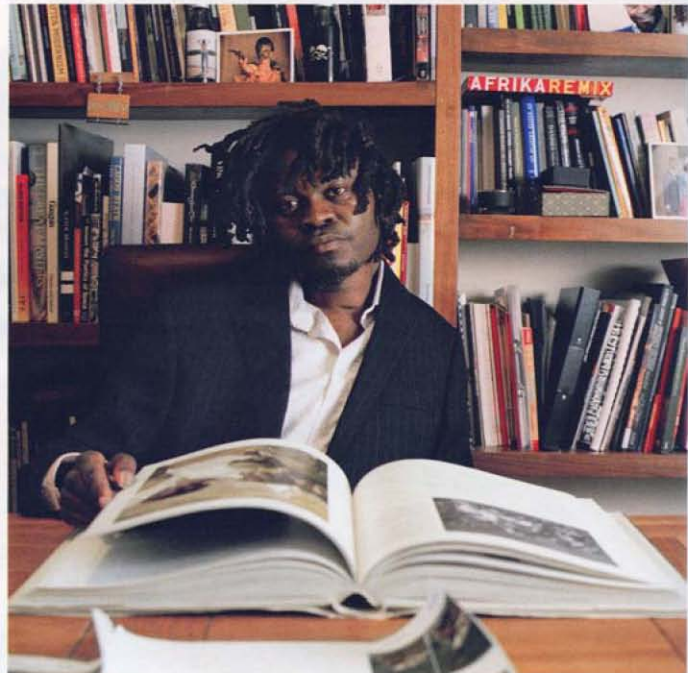
The artist speaks slowly and rather carefully about his art. After nearly a decade of being asked if he makes work about his identity, he is impatient with such questions. Shonibare describes the "double dilemma" of being inevitably seen as a Black artist who either does or does not create art about being Black: "You are African aren't you, so why don't you make art about your origins?" a teacher once said to him. He has tried to resolve this dilemma by offering positive images of Black people in his work, and wherever possible, he uses himself as the subject, as in his series "Diary of a Victorian Dandy," 1998. The photographs

are a subversive reversal of racial and class roles loosely based on Hogarth's "Rake's Progress." Shonibare appears as the bon vivant in five different scenes, posing in elegant attire and enjoying pleasures normally reserved for whites, who here exist only to serve, amuse or admire him as the exotic "other" in their midst.

As his art suggests, Shonibare thrives on contradictions. The viewer is lured by the magnificent fabrics and curious narratives only to be surprised by the dark themes the works address. He says he enjoys "incongruity—when things are not supposed to work together, both culturally and aesthetically." Just as I think he's becoming overly serious, he laughs and delightedly tells me about some stuffed bats he's making as props for works in the Cohan show, and I am reminded that humor, too, is part of his sensibility. On my way out, I pause to look at a dollhouse-size replica of his residence on the mantelpiece. Its interior is 18th century as interpreted by Shonibare, with a miniature Fragonard and, under a bed made up with Dutch wax fabric, a tiny chamber pot. ☐



Clockwise from near left: *Toy Painting 6*, 2003; a video still from *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)*, 2004; Shonibare in his library, leafing through a volume on Goya—"About 70 percent of my work is research"; *Colonel Tarleton and Mrs. Oswald Shooting*, an installation at London's National Gallery last summer; and *Maxa*, 2003.



ART+AUCTION FEBRUARY 2008 | WWW.ARTINFO.COM