

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Downey, Anthony, "Yinka Shonibare," *BOMB*, Fall 2005: 24-31

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YINKA SHONIBARE

BY ANTHONY DOWNEY

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YINKA SHONIBARE FIRST CAME TO WIDESPREAD ATTENTION through his use of Dutch wax fabric, which he has used both as the ground of his paintings and to clothe his sculptures. This bright and distinctive fabric was originally produced in Dutch Indonesia, where no market was found for it, and subsequently copied and produced by the English, who eventually sold it to West Africans, for whom it became a popular everyday item of clothing. It also, crucially, became a sign of identitarian “authenticity” both in Africa and, later, for Africans in England. A colonial invention, Dutch wax fabric offers itself as both a fake and yet “authentic” sign of Africanness, and Shonibare’s use of it in his paintings and sculptures accentuates a politics of (in)authenticity by simultaneously presenting both the ideal of an “authentic” identity and identity as a “fabrication.” Although he has been producing mostly installation-based work of late, Shonibare is also an accomplished painter, and that is where his practice began in the ‘80s. It is also easy to overlook, in all the theorizing about postcoloniality and the politics of identity, the amount of amusement and frivolity he can pack into his work.

Shonibare was recently nominated for the Turner Prize and used the opportunity to screen his first film, *Un Ballo in Maschera* (A Masked Ball), 2004. Taking as its starting point the controversial figure of King Gustav III of Sweden, who was assassinated in 1792, Shonibare weaves an intricate and enigmatic tale. Employing the medium of dance, the film explores a number of conceptual and choreographical ambiguities, not least the indeterminacies of identity and gender implicit in the use of costumes and masks. On a formal level Shonibare’s use of repetition and the lack of dialogue forgo the conventions of mainstream film and those associated with so-called realist narrative. The events represented in the film, despite their apparent historical remoteness, also resonate within contemporary political debates on the nature of power and the excess associated with authoritarian regimes.

ANTHONY DOWNEY

Let’s start with *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Why this turn to film?

YINKA SHONIBARE

My work has always used a theatrical language. The first time I did anything filmic was in photography: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [2001] was actually a series of stills from a film in which I acted out the various parts in *Dorian Gray*. I’ve always wanted to do film, but I did photography, I did stills, because I just did not have the resources to make the kind of film I envisioned. My work comments on power, or the deconstruction of power, and I tend to use notions of excess as a way to represent

that power—deconstructing things within that. I needed to do something very elaborate in this case, and of course that would require financial resources. The production of *Un Ballo in Maschera* was a collaboration between Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Swedish television. The agreement with Swedish television was that they would make a documentary of me making the film, and that was what they would show, but when they saw the finished film they created prime-time space for it. I thought that was very impressive, to have an art film on the Swedish equivalent of the BBC at 8 PM. Then again, the interest in art in Stockholm and Sweden generally, the interest in culture, is quite high. But back to your question: I’d also wanted to link my costume work with the masquerade performance aspect of my practice, and it seems a progressive logic to move from the photographic work and the tableaux with the paintings I’d done and conclude with film.

AD I would like to further link the notion of excess with the idea of theatricality in your work. Do you see that excess as something *beyond* theater?

YS The main preoccupation within my art education was the construction of signs as outlined in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies*. So the idea of the theatrical for me is actually about art as the construction of a fiction, art as the biggest lie. What I want to suggest is that there is no such thing as a natural signifier, that the signifier is always constructed—in other words, that what you represent things with is a form of mythology. Representation itself comes into question. I think that theater enables you to really emphasize that fiction. For example, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a black man plays within an upper-class nineteenth-century setting, and also in *The Diary of a Victorian Dandy*. The theatrical is actually a way of re-presenting the sign.

AD What you’re saying is that the sign itself is unstable, which ties into the notion of the identitarian ambiguity that you bring out in the masquerade in *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

YS It goes further than that. On the one hand, the masquerade is about ambiguity, but on the other hand—and you could take the masquerade festivals in Venice and Brazil as examples—it involves a moment when the working classes could play at being members of the aristocracy for a day, and vice versa. We’re talking about power within society, relations of power. As a black person in this context, I can create fantasies of empowerment in relation to white society, even if historically that equilibrium or equality really hasn’t arrived yet. It’s like the carnival itself, where a working-class person can occupy the position of master for however long the Venice carnival goes on—and

UN BALLO IN MASCHERA (A MASKED BALL), 2004. COLOR DIGITAL VIDEO, 32-MINUTE LOOP. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, JAMES COHAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND STEPHEN FRIEDMAN GALLERY, LONDON.



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it goes on for ages—and members of the aristocracy could take on the role of the working classes and get as wild and as drunk as possible. So the carnival in this sense is a metaphor for the way that transformation can take place. This is something that art is able to do quite well, because it's a space of transformation, where you can go beyond the ordinary.

AD That's quite a nice phrase—"fantasies of empowerment"—very Fanon-esque. I'm interested in this notion of carnivalesque masquerade, the way it inverts power relations. Do you see the political itself as a masquerade?

YS Well, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, believe it or not, was inspired by the current global situation, particularly the war in Iraq. I was thinking about King Gustav III of Sweden, who was fighting many wars on many fronts—with Russia, with Denmark—and spending a lot of money; as a result of this high spending, his population was impoverished, suffering. He was also an actor and a dandy, and he started the art academies in Sweden. He modeled himself on the French court and only spoke French. But he was fiddling while Rome was burning. There was a conspiracy to kill him. He loved masked balls, and he loved the theater, and it was while he was at one of those balls that he was assassinated. So I used him as a metaphor for power and its deconstruction. But there is an opportunity within my film for redemption. Things that happen get undone: the king gets killed, but he gets up again, and at the end of the film he steps backward, out of the scene. And, of course, I also played with gender positions, changing them around. The "power" in my film is a woman, and the assassin is also a woman dressed as a man.

Structurally, I didn't want a narrative that was beginning, middle, end; I wanted to look formally at the way film is presented. In the museum setting, films are usually played in a loop. What I decided to do with this film was to ask all the actors to act the idea of the loop. What you see when the action comes around again is actually a reenactment of what went before; it's not an electronic loop, it's *imitating* one. I wanted the audience to participate, to try to work it out: Okay, the second time around, that actor was not quite where he was before. It was a way of looking at formal repetition and also the way history repeats. From the Roman to the Ottoman Empire, we have this repetition of power that always returns to the same point—the ambition to expand imperially is not very different from what's going on now. As an artist, I won't take a moral position; I think it's important not to work for any one side politically. You need to keep your objectivity, unless you're in Stalinist Russia. But what you *can* do is place a number of options in front of people so that they can think through them.

AD The act of not taking sides would seem to be part of an ethical, rather than political, approach if we're looking at *Un Ballo in Maschera* as a historical metaphor

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THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY (SCENES 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), 2001, 11
BLACK AND WHITE PRINTS AND ONE C-PRINT, \$50 + \$6 LATCH.

UN BALLO IN MASCHERA (A MASKED BALL), 2004.
COLOR DIGITAL VIDEO, 32 MINUTE LOOP.



- for political redemption. Is the film a direct comment on the present day in this sense?
- YS I give the audience two options. You see the king go into the ball, indulge himself in the excess and get murdered. But I give him the option to get up again. It's up to the audience to decide which version prevails. Do they want him to stay murdered, or do they want him to be saved? The audience is seeing both possibilities. In real life, of course, there is no rewind, or replay; an event happens and that's it.
- AD So you're asking the audience to be complicit, if not in the assassination, then in the redemption.
- YS It depends on the person. Viewers have to make up their mind whether this person had the right to assassinate that leader or not. You need a leader, but what sort of leader? The film gives you the opportunity to engage with the various tensions. In the dance and the theatricality as well as the breathtaking visuals, you're part of that excess and you indulge in it, but then it's not that simple because there's a dark side to this beauty. It's not just a lavish banquet; there's always this "terrible beauty."
- AD "All changed, changed utterly. A terrible beauty is born." It's a particularly apposite quote from W. B. Yeats, bearing in mind that it comes from a poem that expresses his own disillusionment with revolution.
- YS Yes, so there's always this thing that isn't what you imagined it to be at first.
- AD There's also an absence of dialogue in your film. That was obviously intentional in the presentation of visual rather than aural excess. Is this what Barthes calls *jouissance*, the literal pleasure in the image itself?
- YS It's really about the presence of the actors. I wanted to avoid linear narrative, and dialogue sometimes makes that difficult unless I were to use dialogue in a very sophisticated manner. I didn't want to distract from the presence of the actors. I left in things that would be taken out in "normal" film, like the effort of their dancing, or their breathing, or the sound of their clothes. Everything's exaggerated so that you can just focus on the people, on the movement, on the visuals. That also gave the action a slightly disturbing quality, which I liked.
- AD I quite like the idea of redemption as an ethical or relative, rather than political, gesture.
- YS I don't force that notion onto the audience. You have the opportunity to rethink these things, but you don't necessarily have to. There are people who believe that the war in Iraq is absolutely right, as there are people who believe that it is absolutely wrong. There are two sides, and I think that's what an artist has to recognize: positions are always relative.
- AD And not taking a side is in fact taking a side, insofar as it opens a third space, beyond that easy agreement or disagreement.
- YS Even racism is about relativity, do you see what I mean? I guess as an artist that relativity is what I want to highlight and play with. According to Brecht, the audience completes the work of art, and that is a notion I very much subscribe to.
- AD Also the Brechtian idea that you have to draw attention to the artifice of the theater in order to involve yourself politically in what is happening.



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I know you're a big film buff. I want to talk about the importance of film for you. I mean particular filmmakers, particular films. I know you've cited Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* as a film that interests you.

YS Actually, for *Un Ballo in Maschera* I looked to that film again, because it shows how ridiculous excess can be, and how when you push it further, it becomes extremely primitive: the primitive side of humanity. I also like the pace of the film, the darkness of it, and its form. There are also some Godard films in which he focuses on form. You can do that with art; you can reference your form quite easily in a way that people understand. But with the saturation of Hollywood cinema there has also been a return to the idea of referencing the form of the film itself, which the great modernist filmmakers, particularly the French, were doing. This was something I felt I wanted to do: make an art film that refers to itself.

AD Two things come to mind: the long shot in Godard's *Weekend* that tracks along a road of burning cars, and the circular narrative of Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*.

YS Yes, Resnais used the device of repetition in that film. That's a very good one to reference, because of the sheer excess of that film: they're all in this amazing hotel. It's certainly one of my favorite films. French New Wave cinema is probably my favorite period of film. You can watch them over and over again and see something new every time.

AD It's a formal device. They don't introduce repeti-

tion as mere repetition, but repetition as difference, so to speak, because you're *looking* again and again. For example, I was looking at *Un Ballo in Maschera* again to see what's different from when I watched it before. It's a re-thinking as well as a re-looking. In a way it's repetition as the introduction of ambiguity and camouflage. Which brings me to the notion of ambiguity in your work, not least in your use of Dutch wax fabric. That fabric is a classic example of the so-called signifier of African authenticity, and yet it was produced by the Dutch for sale in Indonesia and then ended up in Nigeria. There is this notion of *fabrication* in your work—fabric itself, of course, but also fabrication, the telling of stories.

YS To be an artist, you have to be a good liar. There's no question about that. If you're not, you can't be a good artist. Basically, you have to know how to fabricate, how to weave tales, how to tell lies, because you're taking your audience to a nonexistent space and telling them that it does exist. But you have to be utopian in your approach. You have to create visions that don't actually exist yet in the world—or that may actually someday exist as a result of life following art. It's natural for people to want to be sectarian or divisive. Different cultures want to group together, they want to stick to their own culture, but what I do is create a kind of mongrel. In reality most people's cultures have evolved out of this mongrelization, but people don't acknowledge that. British culture in reality is very mixed. There's a way in which people want to keep this notion of purity, and that ultimately leads to

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SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA, 2003, 14 FIGURES,
14 CHAIRS AND TABLE, MIXED MEDIA, 52 x 192 x 110"

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the gas chambers. What I am doing may be humorous so as to show the stupidity of things. But at the same time I understand that the logical conclusion of sectarianism is Auschwitz, or the "logical" in its starkest manifestation. So even though these works are humorous, there's a very dark underlying motivation.

AD Which puts you in a position of playing out the carnivalesque yourself, because essentially it is carnivalesque to engage humorously with a very serious subject. This is precisely what Mikhail Bakhtin talks about when he explores the notion of the carnivalesque, the humorous taking down, or usurpation, of power. How do you feel about your own power relation to the audience, or your power to produce the work? Are those issues for you personally?

YS It's very interesting: even though I make work about power, the so-called establishment and so on, I was made a Member of the British Empire. I am now Yinka Shonibare MBE, and of course there was the question of whether I was going to refuse the honor. The poet Benjamin Zephaniah, who is of Caribbean origin, had refused—I think it was an OBE. In the end, I felt that, given what my work is about, to have actually been acknowledged and honored by the establishment was quite interesting. And I felt it was more useful to accept it than to refuse it. Maybe I'm a bit old-fashioned, but I think it's better to make an impact from within rather than from without. In a way I feel flattered, because I never really thought the establishment took any notice of what artists did.

AD Unless you're advocating armed revolution.

YS Yes. So it's quite amusing for me. And hopefully it's a platform that will enable me to do more work.

AD In order to deconstruct those power structures, you must be engaged with them. I mean, standing outside throwing the proverbial Molotov cocktail is only going to get you so far. However, once you are inside—hidden, or *cloaked*, within those structures—there is a totally different power structure to be addressed. Which again brings in the carnivalesque, masquerade and the notion of camouflage.

YS Well, it's the notion of the Trojan horse. With the Trojan horse, you can go in unnoticed. And then you can wreak havoc.

AD I like this notion of appearing as something you're not, or making the work look like something it isn't. People might look at your work and think of it in terms of decoration, but it is not that. You use decoration as a sign of excess.

YS And it is actually also decoration, because it is a deliberate complicity with popular culture. I once heard Howard Hodgkin say that he was offended because his work had been described as decorative. I don't feel that way, because I deliberately use popular culture. A very interesting thing has now happened in the London fashion world since my Turner Prize nomination: a number of designers have taken on my work by using "African" textiles in a big way. It's showing up in a lot of collections. If you go to the High Street fashion stores in London,



you'll see clothes, dresses, bags and things made out of those fabrics. It's kind of exploded. In fact, Harvey Nichols invited me to do their window dressing. I turned it down. I was not totally opposed to it in principle; I was just too busy. But the good thing about that is that they went ahead and did a kind of Yinka Shonibare window anyway. So I like that sort of relationship between popular culture and art, the kind of to-ing and fro-ing. Do you see what I mean?

AD Absolutely. It creates a sort of fluidity and a certain ambiguity. You are not quite sure what the difference is—if indeed there is one—between the fabrics encountered in the "downmarket" environment of Brixton market or the so-called upmarket environment of Harvey Nichols.

YS And also the moment this fabric gets shown at

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DIARY OF A VICTORIAN DANDY (FROM TOP): 03.00 HOURS, 17.00 HOURS, 21.00 HOURS, 1998, C-PRINTS.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY



BIG BOY, 2002. WAX PRINTED COTTON FABRIC AND FIBERGLASS, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE.
HENRY JAMES (1843-1916) AND HENDRIK C. ANDERSEN (1872-1940), 2001. TWO LIFE SIZE MANNEQUINS, DUTCH WAX PRINTED COTTON FABRIC, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE.

the Turner Prize exhibition, at the Tate, suddenly it becomes chic. It's the way the so-called outsider stuff—"peasant" clothes, for example—suddenly became chic.

- AD Which is a good metaphor for masquerade and the carnivalesque: when the low becomes high and the high becomes low.
- YS It's interesting that the very wealthy go to Harvey Nichols and buy a very expensive fashion of something, when they could just go to Brixton market, buy the fabric and have it made very cheaply.
- AD Let's move on to your latest project, which is something else entirely. You've been working with the Royal Opera House on your version of *Swan Lake*, which you are calling *Odile and Odette*. Can you talk about how that came about, and then perhaps about what that project is and how it fits in—if indeed it does—with the discussion we've had?
- YS Throughout 2005 there has been a celebration of African culture in London, called "Africa '05," for which a number of institutions around the city are doing projects relating to African culture. The Africa Centre approached me to do an installation there. The Africa Centre is at Covent Garden, and that's also where the Royal Opera House is, so because of the proximity of the two, I proposed a project with the Royal Opera House. I thought that would be a great opportunity to look at the relationship between the Royal Opera House and the Africa Centre, both institutions representing a colonial relationship and a cultural relationship. The Africa Centre exists as a result of England's encounter with Africa. But then I thought, What would I do at the Royal Opera House? I tried to go beyond what would be expected of somebody of African origin and I thought, I've never done a ballet, so why not? You laugh, but you know, no one ever questioned Picasso's interest in and use of African art, but Africans are always expected

to just do "African" things. In the contemporary world where we all travel, that's just not realistic. I see opera like everybody else, and I see popular culture like everybody else. I always like to work with iconic things, and *Swan Lake* is very well known, probably the most popular ballet. It's also a perfect choice because the basic story concerns a prince who wants to get married, and there's a good, sweet swan, Odette, and a bad swan, Odile. Usually the two roles are danced by the same ballerina. In all productions Odile is put into black clothes and Odette wears swanlike, nicer things. The roles—one as the ego and one as alter—in my version are more ambiguous: you would not necessarily be able to tell who is the bad one and who is the good one. One role is danced by a black ballerina and the other is danced by a white ballerina, and between them is an empty gold frame; the ballerinas do solos from *Swan Lake*, but they mirror each other's movements, creating the illusion that one dancer is a reflection of the other. The way the piece is lit, it's actually quite convincing as a reflection. Kim Brandstrup is the choreographer, and the dancers have done very beautifully. The interesting thing is that at some point they switch places so that the white ballerina is the reflection, and then it keeps going back and forth. And they do the dance twice. The pointe shoes and the tutus are made out of African textiles; I guess that's part of my signature style. My proposal to the Opera House was that, rather than show the film of the ballet at the Africa Centre, they screen it outside in the summer where they usually show live footage of performances happening inside the Opera House so that members of the public can have free access. A lot of people show up for the screenings. This year they've got screens at Trafalgar Square and at a number of places around the country in various city squares, and my film will be run during

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ODILE AND ODETTÉ. 2005. COLOR FILM.



AD Without even necessarily understanding the significance of what they are looking at, right? They are in Trafalgar Square watching a Royal Opera House ballet, and then suddenly during the intermission they are watching your film. Finally, what are you working on after this project?

YS I've got two shows coming up in New York in October, one at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and one at the James Cohan Gallery. And after that I'm working on a major installation in Paris for 2007, for a new museum that's just been built, called the Quai Branly. It's an ethnographic museum, but they want to commission contemporary artists to do works there. It's right by the Eiffel Tower, and it's a big deal for the French; the prime minister is very involved. I'm working on a project called *Garden of Love*, where I'm creating a kind of French formal garden inside the museum; there will be fountains, and lovers taken from Fragonard paintings. Headless, of course. Filmwise there are other projects . . . but I'll tell of those another time.

the intermissions of live feeds from the Royal Opera House's performances.

AD That ties in quite nicely with your Trojan Horse metaphor: it's being quietly wheeled in, and the distinction between the two productions is minimal, but it's there.

YS It becomes part of the so-called high art genre, if you like. You couldn't really go higher than the Opera House, could you? I also like the fact that it's outside, so a lot of people will see the work without having to be intimidated by the idea of going to the Royal Opera House or having to buy tickets.

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