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Alien Nation

This essay was commissioned by selvedge magazine, and published in Issue 02, September/October 2004, pp.18-21 (ISSN:1742-254X)

...if you want African, the kind of primitive stereotype, then I will give it to you...¹

Yinka Shonibare has been shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize for "his sculptural installations in which he continues to use African fabric to subvert conventional readings of cultural identity"². My vote goes to this prolific maker and exhibitor of paintings, digital works, installations, sculptures, objects, photographs, works that fizz with pattern and colour, that catch and mesmerise the eye, and that – importantly – engage and exercise the mind with wit, humour and bright, pulsing intelligence...

The specific shows cited by the Tate in relation to his nomination are *Double Dutch* at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (14 May – 5 September 2004), for which there is a great publication of the same name, and his solo show *Play With Me* at Stephen Friedman Gallery, London (28th November 2003 – 17th January 2004). The Turner Prize winner will be announced live on Channel 4 on 6 December 2004, and the exhibition will run at Tate Britain from 20 October – 23 December 2004.

In the early 1990s, Shonibare 'gave us African' when he presented stretched 'batik-printed' fabric as abstract paintings, small-scale, and wall-mounted in groups. By that initial act of creation and installation, Shonibare set up a number of important modes and strategies that he has then mobilised separately and together in impactful, juicy and challenging works...

His undoubted challenge to what constituted painting was to elect to use a textile, and not painting canvas, but rather a low-grade mass-produced version of Indonesian batik. This was a self-conscious act of defiance within the systems of fine art practice: to insist that this cloth's banality and ordinariness is worthy of artistic scrutiny is to enter an important territory already inhabited by, for example, feminist practitioners, craft-makers, and 'folk' artists in which the traditional

¹ Hynes, N. (2001) *Re-dressing history - Yinka Shonibare*. *African Arts*. Vol. 34, No. 3, Autumn, pp.60-5, 93.

² www.yinka-shonibare.co.uk/turner-prize-yinka-shonibare/yinkashonibare-turnerprize1.htm

hierarchies of modernist painting are subverted by the valorisation of 'low' materials and forms of production. I think here of artists like Faith Ringgold whose *Echoes of Harlem* (1980) utilises the domestic fabric and metaphor of the quilt to activate family narratives and echo with the lived experiences – expressed in quilts – of North American former slaves like Harriet Powers (Fry, 2002). What is interesting about Shonibare's choice of industrialised fake-ethnic 'batik-print' is how it fundamentally shakes up the assured sense of authenticity, which on the surface it provides in relation to its 'African' look and feel...

Pamela Johnson's idea of textile as a "malleable transmitter of ideas"³ is quite useful here: not only is fabric itself a soft surface ripe for artistic and conceptual manipulation, but that malleability extends beyond into areas where meaning can be manoeuvred, shifted, bastardised even – Derrida's 'undecidable' as operated in text(ile) by Sarat Maharaj. As a British-born black man, raised in Nigeria and Britain, art-school trained and resident in Britain, but with an international practice, Shonibare is uniquely positioned in the contemporary phase of the complicated historical relationship between Africa and Europe (a relationship that continues to evolve today). He has experienced pressure to "be black" and to exhibit "African-ness" in his practice, terms in those cases infused with particular translations of the exotic and the primitive, but his self-identification is reassuringly complicated and personal experience. As "an African living in Britain", he has variously embraced Nigerian, European, and black as much as African or British as identifications, and he refuses "any preconceived notions of what I might do as a black painter"⁴. This is not to say that he refutes his various connections to specific locations, histories or cultures, as long as they allow him to remain named but unfixed.

The stereotypes of Africa and Europe, and their interdependences, form narratives, experiences, and visual references that have then become understood as authentically and traditionally African or European. Those 'truths' then are so embedded in African and European cultural sensibilities, that their complexities and contradictions have become erased. In relation to Shonibare's commercial 'batik-print' cloth, which is sometimes called Dutch Wax, the reading is 'African'. And indeed it is mobilised as a fashion 'look' to celebrate black pride in Brixton or Dalston and, in more subtle form, in the work of textile designers like Cheryl Branford-Peers. That repetition of motif and style perpetuates and strengthens its perceived authenticity and authority, but in fact the printed fabric is based on Indonesian batik, and is manufactured in the Netherlands and in Britain for export to West Africa, where it is popular, but understood as foreign. Moreover, in considering the contemporary trade routes for this fabric, a subtext relating to Dutch colonialism, British colonialism, their historical trade, trickery and pillage is also activated. And contemporary immigration relationships – topical stuff – are

³ Johnson, P. (2000) *Thinking Process* in Art Textiles 2. Bury St. Edmunds: Art Gallery of Bury St. Edmunds, pp.17-24, 19.

⁴ Yinka Shonibare quoted in Hynes, N. Op.Cit.

signposted.

In relation to cultural 'truth', Shonibare plays with associations that become read as original, so that when that potent fabric gets used to construct the 'aliens' in his *Dysfunctional Family* (1999), we are unsure who the aliens are, how appropriate their 'African' covering is, and wherein lies the nature of the dysfunction...

But Shonibare's original stretched fabric 'paintings', also ask entangled questions about the privilege of the 'able body' and the dominance of white men in modernism (other forms of cultural colonialism, I suggest):

Historically the people who made huge, unbroken modernist paintings, were middle-class white American men. I don't have that physique; I can't make that work. So I fragmented it, in a way which made it both physically manageable and emphasizes the political critique⁵.

In *Mr and Mrs Andrews without Their Heads* (1998), Shonibare presents a pair of life-sized headless mannequins in batik-print cotton costumes with dog, bench and gun, restaged in overt reference to Gainsborough's famous painting (1747). Shonibare asks us to consider the implications of dressing these pillars of 18th century white and colonialist respectability in fabric that references (if not represents) the 'dark continent' with all its historical prejudices of uncivilised and rampant savagery, sexual licentiousness, ignorance and poverty...

Mrs. Andrews' neatly crossed feet are prim in relation to the florid, richly-patterned, brightly coloured fabric of her skirt and bodice, with all its constructed references to Brixton market, 'African' pride, and a pulsing 'hot' beat... would Mrs. Andrews' neat feet find the rhythm of this 'Africa'? But more: Mrs. Andrews has 'lost her head' – either seduced by the 'other' of this unfamiliar 'black heat' (the white colonist's greatest terror...), or executed in reprisal for the crimes her class and culture carried out in the name of civilization, Christianity, and greed on (a very real) Africa? If we needed reminding of the culpable dominance of white, male, able-bodied, land-owners (or takers), we can see it in the easy, confident stance of Mr. Andrews. But Shonibare's post-colonialist twist is that he too is emasculated and dis-abled, swathed in the dominant (if inauthentic) pattern of 'Africa', and, headless, he colonises only an empty landscape. I very much enjoy how Shonibare plays with stereotypes of the exotic by using excess (extravagant colours, wildly clashing pattern, interference with the sacred icons of a dominating culture...). In an interview with Nancy Hynes, Shonibare reveals his strategy whereby he "took out all the subtlety" in order to be "deliberately primitive and exotic" in provocative counterpoint to the restraint, civility, and cultural currency of Gainsborough's original painting⁶.

⁵ www.disabilityartsonline.org/site/yinka_shonibare

⁶ Hynes, N. Op.Cit.

In the recent the *Play with Me* exhibition at the Stephen Friedman Gallery the work, which approached the same themes but in another form is *Maxa*, an installation of 76 emulsion on textile circular panels collected on a cobalt blue wall measuring 330 x 805 cms. This is camp, contemporary colonialism at its best! Shonibare has colonised a wall, removing it from the norm of the white gallery cube, immersing it in lush and sexy blue. The circular panels are covered in many of the multitude of industrially mass-produced batik-print fabrics, which he has made his signature. And they are overlaid with hand-drawn crudely primitive paintwork, creating additional intriguing motifs drawn from all manner of sources. The resultant clashes and interferences, which result from these juxtapositions of pattern, colour and texture, make up a large-scale abstract and heroic 'painting' (easily the size of a Rothko or a Jasper Johns) that is immediately undermined as a 'painting' by its own textile materiality and its formation from smaller multiples on a coloured wall.

This 'quilt', for it does in some 'other textile' way relate to the "scraps of lace, labels, chintz, gingham, and other feminine paraphernalia" which bring together bits of culturally significant cloth to make a bigger whole, mimics high modernism but uses 'low cloth', crude paintwork, brash coloration, and fake-ethnic patterning to tremendous affect. While the use of the 'African' cloth is still forefronted, and the reading is still 'African', even that set of meanings is troubled by some of the motifs used which are less certain and easy to place – there are, for example, orange shamrocks here that (to this Northern Irish woman) seem to illuminate other possibilities in relation to the colonised and the authentic...

It seems that just as we felt that we were beginning to understand the codes of Yinka Shonibare's practice, he self-assuredly twists them again, and we still don't know who or what is alien, how appropriate is appropriation, and what dysfunctions are being referenced...