



RAVEL & SEE Kobena Mercer

BLACK DIASPORA ART PRACTICES SINCE THE 1980s

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ART THAT IS ETHNIC IN INVERTED COMMAS: YINKA SHONIBARE

Poised between two cultures and enjoying every minute of it, Yinka Shonibare produces a playful and inquisitive art out of ironies that arise when the postmodern and the postcolonial collide. Since graduation he has fused skepticism, modesty, and wit in a desire to reinvent painting and sculpture as a point of public dialogue and visual pleasure.

The result is work such as *Installation* (1992), composed of some fifty panels in which stretched canvas has been replaced by brightly colored African fabric, each piece bearing references to color-field painting either frontally or on the edges of the frame. In this disarmingly simple move, he spins the equations of modernist primitivism right off their axis. Opening up all sorts of spaces in which the viewer's assumptions can be played with, seduced, and abandoned, Shonibare enjoys calling into question the dodgy ideology of authenticity held in common by discourses on aesthetics and ethnicity alike. "I am actually producing something perceived as ethnic, in inverted commas," he says during our interview, "but at the same time the African fabric is something industrially produced, and given its cultural origins my own authenticity is questioned." Cut loose from the often overbearing seriousness that adheres to issue-based art about identity, the key terms of Shonibare's postconceptual turn are excess, seduction, desire, and complicity.

As he put it in an artist's statement for a 1994 exhibition at Center 181 Gallery in London, "Just imagine being a primitive, a proper primitive that is. A primitive that is beyond civilization, a primitive in a state of perpetual indulgence, a primitive of excess. I think I would really enjoy that. Here too I can be a kind of urban primitive: a kind of back to nature cliché with a twist. Oh how I long to be ethnic, not just ethnic, but authentic ethnic. I love paint, it's really sumptuous, yum."

With *Double Dutch* (1994) (fig. 6.1), the basic premise of the earlier installation received a fresh inflection of excess. Adding thick dollops of impasto, often in variegated

patterns that play off the gaudy designs of the fabrics, and setting them off against a wall painted shocking pink, Shonibare brings minimalist abstraction into dialogue with the semiotic density of the connotations woven into the African textiles. For although the fabrics may be stereotypically taken to signify an exotic African otherness, they have a hidden history of interculturalism written into them.

Popular in West Africa since the 1960s when their jazzy colors captured postindependence verve, the Dutch wax print actually originated in Indonesia. Indigenous batik techniques were later industrialized by Dutch colonizers and manufactured in Holland. The British copied, then monopolized, the process, with factories in Manchester employing Asian workers and English designers to produce goods for export to West African markets. Alluding to this ambiguous import-export history (as well as to Malcolm McLaren's wheezy mid-1980s appropriation of South African township jive), *Double Dutch* teases out the way in which, far from being intrinsic to an origin, meanings are stitched into an artifact by the circuits of translation and exchange through which it travels.

As in his subsequent *Sun, Sea and Sand* (1995) — in which a thousand paper bowls are wrapped in similar fabrics and set on a blue flooring — Shonibare's strategy achieves a wobbly distancing effect which draws attention to the object-like presence of the material from which the connotations of the fabric float off as signifiers gone astray in the circuits of cultural value. What is interesting is how this undermines the double binds into which diaspora artists are often stitched by the demand to be dutifully representative of one's ethnicity. "Really, I haven't got anything didactic to offer," he explains. "I want audiences to experience the work, which relates to my home background, but then that's me quoting the received stereotypes of my background. What I've found, making work in Britain, is that when you make work about your origins, all it can be about is your origins. But if you don't make work about your origins, people will say you're an African artist who doesn't make work about African subjects, so your identity becomes suspect."

Damned if you do and damned if you don't: black artists are often bedeviled by expectations that there must be biographical associations in the art. "What I've noticed with a lot of black artists is that even if you do not put yourself in that box, other people will," he adds, and indeed some English critics have come away from Shonibare's work feeling that it is not quite African enough. Informed by the late 1980s debates around Rasheed Araeen, Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper, and other black British artists, Shonibare refuses to be an otherness machine; yet far from sidestepping politics in favor of art that is ideology-lite, he is wary of taking fixed positions precisely because he has an in-

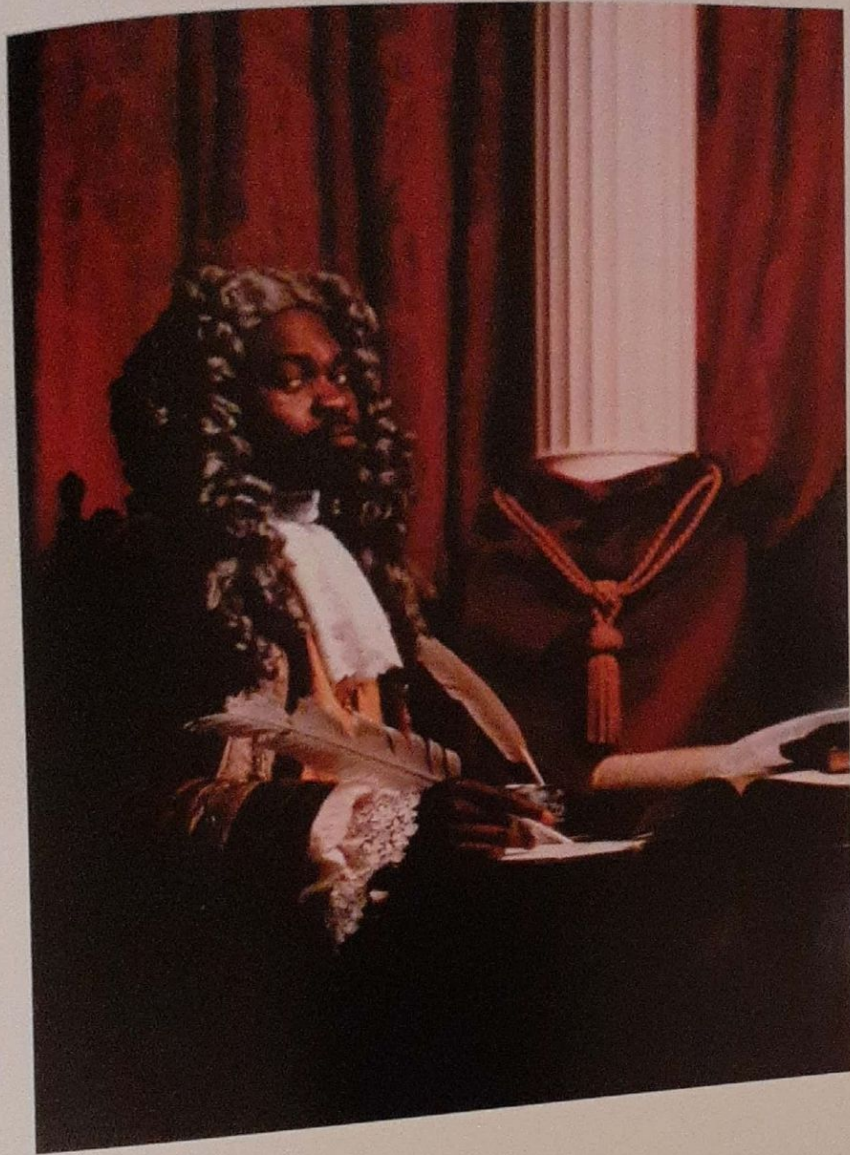


sider's intimate knowledge of the crisscrossing of cultures that has made modern African identities as hybrid and as polyvocal as they are today.

"Is there such a thing as pure origin? For those of the postcolonial generation this is a very difficult question. I'm bilingual. Because I was brought up in Lagos and London—and kept going back and forth—it is extremely difficult for me to have *one* view of culture. It's impossible. How do I position myself in relation to that multifaceted experience of culture?"

The question is answered when Shonibare stages himself as an eighteenth-century aristocrat, somewhat resembling Oluadah Equiano, a Yoruba who participated in English labor politics in the 1790s (fig. 6.2). Far from revealing an essential self, the hilarious irony wrought by his costume shows that excess depends on others. "In order to have aristocratic freedom to indulge, others need to be colonized. Fine art is excess par excellence. It is not going to emancipate you in any direct way. Even though the upper class is supposed to be dead, multinationals are based on those colonial trading structures. Rather than make overtly political work, I actually become part of the framework by using African fabrics as surrogates for aristocratic trappings. Corporations use the fabric for advertising Western goods, such as footballs and radios, that the natives can aspire to own, and the print becomes a surrogate for the commodity." The fabric serves as the sign that ignites desire—in Africa it has the allure of imported goods, in Europe it evokes *exotica*—but it is when our conversation turns to its appropriation as an emblem of political nationalism among blacks in the diaspora that Shonibare reveals just what a marvelously pliable found object he has alighted upon. "To show an affinity with Africa, young black British use these fabrics for head wraps, robes, and shirts. But the essentialism they associate with the fabrics is actually a myth because their origins are already questioned. At the shop in Brixton Market, they are never quite sure of the origins."

"Postmodernism made it fashionable to take things from here, there, and everywhere," he remarks, bringing to mind Katherine Hamnett's comment on 1980s textiles trends, "Ethnic, ethnic, everywhere." But what happens when ethnics appropriate others' appropriations of ethnicity? In recent years, ceremonial kente cloth, originally woven in Ashanti in Ghana, has found its way via prints manufactured in Korea into sweatshirts and baseball caps worn by African Americans to signify Afrocentric allegiances. Aware of the ambiguities, Shonibare questions kente's iconic status. "Although it's a strong, defiant statement for an African American to wear kente, the very reason why I don't wear things like that is that I will not play the exotic for anyone. The wax prints are surrogates that are out there for anyone to use. What interests me is that area of not quite knowing whether I'm celebrating difference or building a critique."



5.2 Yinka Shonibare, *Untitled (Effnik)*, 1997. © Yinka Shonibare MBE.
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6.2 Yinka Shonibare, *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?*, 1995
Dutch wax cloth, mannequins, mixed media, 168 cm high, installation view.
© Yinka Shonibare 1995. All rights reserved. © AGO 2014.

In this way Shonibare offers an interesting response to the question posed by Anglo-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992) as to whether the “post” in postmodernism is the same as the “post” in postcolonialism. Yes, no, and maybe. By playing with metonymic links between the origins of the cloth, and his own origins among a transnational generation of hyphenated hybrids, Shonibare disinters modernism’s fixed equations in which the high serious gesture, culminating in Clement Greenberg’s doctrine of formalist purity, required a subordinate set of negatives: if color-field = abstract = heroic, then fabric = decorative = frivolous. Shonibare’s strategy is about representation, but it is not figurative. It is about abstraction, but it is not expressive. It is about what he calls “purloined seduction or pretend authenticity,” in which the polarities of masculine, Western, high art, or feminine, non-Western, and craft, are sent packing by means of his elegantly simple substitutive ploy. Hence his recent work—*How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1995) (fig. 6.3)—consisting of Victorian dresses made over in African fabric, shown as part of the africa95 program of exhibitions. As ideologies of otherness exhaust themselves in an era of increasingly global interdependence, Shonibare has fun making a mockery of the artifice of authenticity: “Actually, I’m not angry. I have no authentic expression to offer.”

NOTE

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