

## PROFILE



*Modern Magic (in Pink)* (2022) Yinka Shonibare CBE. Relief print with woodblock and fabric collage on Somerset Satin Radiant White paper, 1099 x 885 mm. Edition: 35 plus 5 APs. Courtesy the artist and Cristea Roberts Gallery, London. Photographer: Todd-White Art Photography. © Yinka Shonibare CBE





Left © Royal Academy of Arts, London; photo: Marcus Leith, 2014

YINKA SHONIBARE CBE RA

# The Best Way to be Alive

**Yinka Shonibare CBE RA** discusses being an artist and how the recurrent themes of identity, class and race feature in his works on paper, with **Romina Provenzi**

**B**eing an artist is life and it is how I survive as a person, with space and a place where I can play. It is an expression of life', observes British-Nigerian artist, Yinka Shonibare CBE RA, during our conversation via Zoom, in December 2022. A fellow of the Royal Academy since 2013 and a Turner Prize nominee in 2004, Shonibare's work is widely acclaimed. He has been collected extensively and exhibited with increasing frequency. Shonibare will have his first show at Cristea Roberts Gallery this autumn, for which he has been working on a series of relief prints.

Shonibare's work explores the recurrent themes of identity, class and race across multiple mediums. In an interview with the Guardian in 2012, Shonibare commented, 'a lot of people come from elsewhere and the idea of an authentic singular culture is a modern myth.' During our conversation, he elaborates, 'Many nations were not nations several years ago. We created that. I think that identity can be fluid and I still believe that it's a construct. I absolutely believe that everything we do in relation to identity, it is by choice.' The ongoing and iconic series, *Libraries*, which includes the *American Library*, the *African Library* and the *British Library*, clearly shows his view on identity. Specifically, the idea for *British Library* was born from observing xenophobic incidents that happened in the UK following Brexit.

The work includes 6,328 books, bound in Dutch wax batik fabric, placed on white shelves, as in a library. Past and present British icons' names, whose ancestors were from outside of the United Kingdom, are printed in gold leaf on the spines of 2,700 of those books. But the artist also included the names of some people who opposed immigration,

which serves to highlight the paradoxes at play. For instance, the choice of the Dutch wax batik fabric as his signature material comes from his desire to make his work highly recognisable, but, 'also because using a very bright material is indeed already a contradiction when you are dealing with dark subject matters such as colonialism and imperialism. This way, the audience doesn't feel immediately alienated and is more sympathetic towards what I want to express.' Shonibare's work resonates with sadness too. This might, in part,

be explained by his love for opera and, in particular, the composer Puccini. Hints of this influence can be seen across his oeuvre and, more directly, in the Italian titles of his work such as: *Addio del Passato* (2010) and *Un Ballo in Maschera* (2004). Shonibare's favourite opera is the most heartbreaking; *Madama Butterfly* by Puccini: 'I just like the music and the sadness with opera. The tragedy, and the theatre, the set, and the design, the costumes, the music and the orchestra; all of them. If you put everything together, it is magic.'



*Mayflower, All Flowers* (2020) Yinka Shonibare CBE. Relief print with woodblock and fabric collage on Somerset Tub Sized Satin 410gsm paper, 967 x 895 mm. Edition: 50 plus 5 APs. Courtesy the artist and Cristea Roberts Gallery, London. © Yinka Shonibare CBE







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*The British Library* (2014) Yinka Shonibare CBE. Hardback books, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, gold foiled names, four iPads, iPad stands, headphones and website, dimensions variable. Tate Collection. Courtesy the artist and Tate Photography, London. Photo: Oliver Cowling. © Yinka Shonibare CBE

For his exhibition at Cristea Roberts Gallery, Shonibare will be releasing a new series of relief prints featuring depictions of African masks with his signature wax batik fabric. The fabric is collaged into areas, hand cut from the prints, that were made in collaboration with master printmaker, Pete Kosowicz, at Thumbprint Editions in south London. Shonibare explains, 'I did etching, monotypes and screenprinting when I was at college but then stopped for a while, before deciding to return to it about five years ago.' After considering a number of techniques, Shonibare opted for woodblock, mixing them with collages: 'techniques using the Dutch wax batik fabrics like in *Unstructured Icons* (2018) and *Cowboy Angels* (2017).' He has also recently created the relief print series

*Mayflower, All Flowers* (2020) and *Modern Magic (in Pink)* (2022). In the new series of prints, Shonibare pays homage to the African contribution to modernism, by highlighting the importance of African masks on Picasso's paintings and sculptures. As he says, 'I discovered that Picasso had a collection of African art. I know by my art education that many modern artists were inspired by African art, and that black culture was also very popular and very fashionable in the late 20s, in Paris. We are going through a kind of African renaissance moment now, too, so I wanted to understand the origins of how black culture became fashionable in western modernism. I am kind of revisiting how the power of African aesthetics managed to inspire a whole movement in the west.'

**Left** *Unstructured Icons – Aristocrat I* (2018) Yinka Shonibare CBE. One from a set of six relief prints with woodblock and fabric collage on Somerset Tub Sized Satin 410gsm paper, 700 x 500 mm. Edition: 25 plus 5 APs. Courtesy the artist and Cristea Roberts Gallery, London. © Yinka Shonibare CBE

Looking back, the artist reflects on his beginnings: 'I remember my struggles at trying to get galleries to look at my work and show it. It was challenging to get these sorts of opportunities, without having the right connections. My friends from college and I used to bypass the problem, by showing our work in empty or squatted buildings around London, but unfortunately such spaces aren't available anymore because they have been transformed into profitable developments.'

Artists will always need time and space to develop their work, without the pressure of the art market, so project spaces and artists' residencies have become increasingly important for emerging artists. Recognising this lack of support, Shonibare established some such opportunities: in 2006, the Shonibare Studio set up Guest Projects London, an artists' residency for early career multidisciplinary artists, which was transformed into the online platform, Guest Artists Digital, during the pandemic. And, in 2019, Shonibare founded the Guest Artists Space Foundation, which has recently opened spaces and residencies in Lagos and Ijebu in Nigeria. Undoubtedly, these platforms offer invaluable support to artists. Shonibare continues: 'being an artist is a way to learn and to connect with the world and it is a process of learning in itself, given that artists do a lot of observation and research too,' and residency initiatives can support those needs.

Shonibare is driven by a constant desire to make art: 'I am inspired by the things that touch me the most at a particular time. Although I want to express myself, I am willing to do that without being literal about it and by using metaphors and all different methods. But, definitively, my motivation to do something comes from what has touched me the most' he states. 'I can be anything I want to be in my art. It is an artist's theatre; it is a performance. It is the biggest fantasy that one could have. And there is so much liberation and freedom in being an artist for me, that I believe that being an artist is the best way to be alive.'

*Yinka Shonibare CBE: Ritual Ecstasy of the Modern* will be at Cristea Roberts Gallery, 22 September – 4 November 2023