



124. *Upstairs Downstairs* (1997). Sixteen hand painted and stencilled Limoges plates, glass and aluminum display cabinet, plastic plate stands, double-sided laminated photograph

125. *How Does a Girl Like You, Get to be a Girl Like You?* (1995). Three costumes of wax print cotton textiles, tailored by Sian Lewis



Bilingual, bicultural, and perched between cultures whose relationship is fraught with inequality, Yinka Shonibare is well equipped to navigate the traffic between cultural traditions, and the expectations that attend these exchanges. His work wittily questions the ideology of cultural authenticity, with particular reference to modernism and imperialism as its most extreme forms. It explodes the seamless production of meaning within not only these symbolic systems, but also their supposed postmodern and post-colonial inversions.

Shonibare is best known for his use of the patterned batik fabrics that are popular in West Africa and also in the West as a signifier of Africa. For Shonibare, the route traced by these fabrics gives the lie to any notion of pure origins: the wax-resist technique originated in Indonesia, whose Dutch colonizers industrialized production and introduced the fabric to Europe, where today it is designed and produced in Manchester, and exported from Britain to Africa and back again, with twists of meaning each time. Shonibare buys his cloth (re-imported from Africa with accrued authenticity) from the predominantly black Brixton area of London. In doing so, he is fully aware that in Africa, where the fabrics symbolize cultural identity, the cloth imported from Britain may be seen to be "better" than that produced locally.¹

123. *Cha Cha Cha* (1997). Wax print cotton fabric, velvet, leather, acrylic, metal



126. *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996-97).
 Reproduction furniture, printed textiles,
 fire screen, marble fireplace, museum props



according to a kind of internalized colonial thinking. Thus, the innocent nationalist symbol unfolds to reveal itself to be as hybrid and complex as any sign of identity in today's post-colonial African diaspora. The economic and cultural patterns of signification woven into the history of this cloth represent the complexity of identity, and this semiotic extravagance allows Shonibare to short-circuit the traditional seriousness of artwork about identity, to deal in "excess, seduction, desire and complicity."²

Shonibare employs these densely symbolic fabrics to undo the ideological underpinnings of systems vested in theories of origins, such as imperialism. *How Does a Girl Like You, Get to be a Girl Like You?* (1995) includes three elaborate Victorian gowns sewn from the colourful batik fabrics, standing serenely oblivious: empresses with clothes, but no heads. In *Upstairs Downstairs* (1997), a replica of

an eighteenth-century china cabinet contains fine decorated plates re-glazed in glaring colours, bearing the names of servants and their household roles. Loudly, and clearly improperly, the work creates a parity between the aristocratic house and its overlooked subjects. On a grander scale, for *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996-97), Shonibare upholsters every surface of an elaborately furnished room with "African" fabric further overlaid with vignettes of British football players of African origin. It is as though the exchange of colonial influence had flowed in the "wrong" direction, with the colonizer absorbing the ethnic customs. The reciprocal effect – since one knows that this is not how this social structure is supposed to work – is of some kind of insurrection or usurpation by an imposter who does not recognize the rules. Elsewhere, Shonibare has portrayed himself as the usurper, garbed in lavish eighteenth-century costume. In these works, the symbolically extravagant fabric is an analogue for the excess built into the ostentatious trappings of class.

Shonibare's work disrupts other value systems staked on authority, such as artistic modernism. In fact, it is possible to argue for a view of modernism as an expression of imperialist presumption.³ Modernism's supposedly apolitical discourse of purity was based on a notion of origins,

127. *Unfilled* (1997). C print,
reproduction baroque frame.
Edition of 5



whether seeking primary form or drawing on “primitive” expression in “other” cultures, or in the romanticized individual producer. In *Double Dutch* (1994), Shonibare stretched pieces of the patterned cloth to make fifty small canvases, which he overpainted on their edges or faces with other bright patterns, and arranged in a grid against a vibrant pink wall. The panels adopt the outward vocabulary of abstract expressionism, a movement indissociable from the rhetoric of mastery and of purity of gesture, to reintroduce a

reminder of the minor decorative craft traditions its ideology of originality suppressed. Like the trajectory of the fabric alluded to in the title, he *doubles back* to pick up elements excised from the story of modernist painting. This inversion and fragmentation of “proper” protocol through a kind of semiotic gibberish⁴ also reopens the door to visual pleasure. As the artist wrote, with ironic naïvete, in a statement accompanying his 1994 exhibition of *Double Dutch*, “I love paint, it’s really sumptuous, yum.”

Shonibare might seem to be a model for the postmodern, post-colonial, hybrid subject drawing on diverse cultural traditions, and his work certainly involves an overturning of modernist and imperialist customs. Yet it also points out the continuing importance placed on origins in this multicultural era. Born in Britain, raised in his parents’ native Nigeria, and living in London, he refuses to fulfil expectations that he make a particular kind of work based on his origins, thus denying any kind of essential identity:



128. *Double Dutch* (1994).
Emulsion and acrylic on printed textiles,
50 panels

Notes

1. Yinka Shonibare in unpublished interview with Diana Nemiroff, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, October 1997.
2. Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, press release, September 1997.
3. For a discussion of the imperialist foundations of modern literature, see Fredric Jameson, "Modernism and Imperialism" in Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said, eds., *Nations, Colonialism and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 43-66. "The traces of imperialism can therefore be detected in Western modernism, and are indeed constitutive of it; but we must not look for them in the obvious places, in content or in representation... [T]hey will be detected spatially, as formal symptoms, within the structure of First World modernist texts themselves."
4. "Double Dutch" is an outdated colloquial term for an unrecognizable (foreign) language.
5. Yinka Shonibare cited in Kobena Mercer, "Art that is Ethic in Invented Context," *Frieze* (Nov-Dec 1995), p. 40.
6. Both quotes from Mercer, p. 41.

129. *Sun, Sex and Sand* (1995).
Mixed media installation



"Really, I haven't got anything didactic to offer. 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."⁵

But what happens when one finds that one has no centre, no essential identity? Says Shonibare, "I'm not angry. I have no authentic expression to offer." Or, as Kobena Mercer asks, succinctly summarizing the crux of Shonibare's work, "What happens when ethnics appropriate others' appropriations of ethnicity?"⁶ The result is an implacable irony, in which individual subjects might audaciously and self-consciously invent their own authenticity. Again, Shonibare's statement for *Double Dutch*: "Just imagine being a primitive, a proper primitive that is. A primitive that is beyond civilisation, a primitive in a state of perpetual indulgence, a primitive of excess. I think I would really enjoy that." Maybe what is gained by usurping the rhetoric of purity is, paradoxically, a return to the possibility of personal self-invention and "pure" seduction. G. K.