

# Alien Nation

IF YOU WANT AFRICAN, THE KIND OF  
PRIMITIVE STEREOTYPE, THEN I WILL GIVE IT TO YOU...





Private Collection



Courtesy of The Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

01 Yinka Shonibare, 'Disfunctional Family', 1999,  
Wax printed cotton textile

02 Faith Ringgold, *Echoes of Harlem*, 1980

03 Yinka Shonibare, Detail 'Maxa', 2003,  
Emulsion, acrylic on textile, 330 x 805 x 5cm

In this year's Turner prize, vote for a prolific maker and exhibitor of paintings, photographs, digital works and installations, 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...

Yinka Shonibare has been shortlisted for his sculptural installations in which he uses African fabric to subvert conventional readings of cultural identity. 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. In that initial act of creation and installation, Shonibare set up a number of important modes and strategies that he has continued to mobilise separately and together in works with great impact.

His undoubted challenge to what constituted painting was to elect to use, not canvas, but a low grade, mass produced textile, a version of Indonesian batik. This was a self conscious act of defiance. To insist that this cloth's banality and ordinariness is worthy of artistic scrutiny, is to enter a territory already inhabited by feminist practitioners, craft makers and 'folk' artists – artists like Faith Ringgold whose *Echoes of Harlem* (1980) uses the domestic fabric and metaphor of the quilt to activate family narratives and echo the experiences of former slaves. But Shonibare's stretched fabric 'paintings' also ask entangled questions about the privilege of the 'able body' and the dominance or cultural colonialism of white men in modernism.

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

What is interesting about Shonibare's choice of industrialised, fake ethnic, 'batik print' is how it shakes our casually confident understanding of an 'African' look. He

demonstrates that the stereotypes of Africa and Europe form visual references that, over time, become recognised as authentic and traditional. These 'truths' are then so embedded in African and European cultural sensibilities that their complexities and contradictions are gradually erased. The interpretation of Shonibare's commercial batik print cloth – sometimes called Dutch Wax – as 'African' is one of these contradictions, not least when it is mobilised as a fashion 'look' to celebrate black pride in Brixton or Dalston.

The 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*. The contemporary trade routes for this fabric activate a subtext relating to Dutch and British colonialism, their historical trade, trickery and pillage, and contemporary immigrant relationships – topical stuff – are signposted too. So that when this potent fabric is used to construct the 'aliens' in Shonibare's *Dysfunctional Family* (1999), we are unsure of who the aliens are, how appropriate their 'African' covering is, and the exact nature of the dysfunction.

Pamela Johnson's idea of textile as a 'malleable transmitter of ideas' is 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, even bastardised. As a British born black man, with an international profile, Shonibare is uniquely positioned to comment on the complicated historical relationship between Africa and Europe.

Shonibare has experienced pressure to 'be black' and to exhibit 'African-ness' in his practice, terms in those cases infused with ideas of the exotic and the primitive, but his self-identification is reassuringly complicated. ▶



04

Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London



05

Courtesy of the National Gallery, London

04 Yinka Shonibare, 'Mr and Mrs Andrews without Their Heads', 1998, Wax-print cotton costumes on armatures, dog, mannequin, bench, gun

05 Thomas Gainsborough, Mr and Mrs Andrews, c.1750, Oil on canvas, 69 x 119cm

06 Yinka Shonibare "Toy Painting 9" 203, Emulsion, acrylic on textile, wire, toys, 99cm diameter x 5cm

He refuses 'any preconceived notions of what I might do as a black painter'. This is not to say that he refutes his connections to specific locations, histories or cultures, as long as they allow him to remain named but unfixed.

In *Mr and Mrs Andrews without their Heads*, Shonibare presents a pair of life sized, headless mannequins in batik print costume restaged in overt reference to Gainsborough's famous painting *Mr and Mrs Andrews*. Shonibare asks us to consider the implications of dressing these pillars of 18th century *white, colonialist* respectability in a fabric that references the 'dark continent' with all its historical prejudices of uncivilised and rampant savagery.

Mrs Andrews' neatly crossed feet are prim in relation to the florid, richly-patterned 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 very real crimes her class and culture carried out against Africa in the name of civilisation and Christianity and out of greed. If we needed reminding of the culpable dominance of white, male, land owners or land 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 disabled, swathed in the dominant, if inauthentic, pattern of Africa and, headless, he colonises only an empty landscape.

Shonibare toys with stereotypes of the exotic using extravagant colours and wildly clashing pattern which interfere with the sacred icons of a dominating culture. In an interview with Nancy Hines, 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.

In his recent solo exhibition, *Play with Me*, at London's Stephen Friedman Gallery, a work which approached the same themes but in another form is *Maxa*, an installation of 76 circular panels collected on a cobalt blue wall. 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 a multitude of his signature industrial, mass produced, batik print fabrics. They are overlaid with hand drawn, crudely primitive motifs from all manner of sources. The 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 nature and its creation from smaller multiples.

*Maxa* relates to scraps of lace, chintz, gingham, and other feminine paraphernalia by bringing together bits of culturally significant cloth to make a bigger whole or a quilt. It mimics high modernism but uses 'low cloth', crude paintwork, brash colouration, and fake-ethnic patterning to tremendous effect. While the use of African cloth is at the forefront, and the reading is still African, even that set of meanings is troubled by some of the motifs used which are less easy to place – there are orange shamrocks that seem to illuminate other possibilities in relation to the colonised.

It seems that just as we felt 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.

••• Dr Catherine Harper

The shows cited in relation to Yinka Shonibare's nomination are *Double Dutch*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 14 May-5 Sept 2004 and *Play With Me*, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, 28 Nov 2003-17 Jan 2004.

