

PORTRAIT / OLLIE CLASPER

LET THEM EAT CAKE

The exuberance of YINKA SHONIBARE's work belies a deep concern with greed, exploitation, identity and social inequality, discovers PAYAL UTTAM

“WE ARE ALL GREEDY and we all like cake,” exclaims British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE to a small audience on the eve of his exhibition opening at Pearl Lam Galleries. He’s gesturing at his sculpture *Cakeman*, a headless figure in a batik tailcoat jacket, hunched over with 11 colourful cakes towering on his back. In place of his head is a black globe charting the rise and fall of the Hong Kong stock market. “The gap between rich and poor is getting bigger and the rich want more and more. *Cakeman* is a symbol of that greed – he looks delicious as well as absolutely disgusting.”

Surrounding the gaudy *Cakeman* is a group of *Champagne Kids*, jaunty sculptures of drunken children that Shonibare has unleashed into the airy gallery. “Those of you who like the finer things in life have likely tried Cristal,” says Shonibare flashing a knowing smile. “These are kind of intoxicated kids with bottles of it.” Dressed in batik aristocratic garb, a boy does a one-handed handstand clutching a near-empty bottle, while another leaps onto the back of a toppling chair poised to take a sip. Carefree and indulgent, the carousing kids are a commentary on the reckless overspending and self-absorption of the wealthy.

Sitting amid his fantastical sculptures in the centre of the gallery, Shonibare cuts a flamboyant figure. Swivelling around in an electric wheelchair, he wears a bright printed shirt, turquoise Converse sneakers and pink floral socks. His neat dreadlocks drop onto his face as his head tilts to the right, the result of a virus that struck him during college, leaving him partly paralysed.

One of Britain’s most respected artists,



Shonibare is known for his carnivalesque mannequins dressed in period costumes. Dancing, eating, copulating and pointing weapons, the headless figures conjure playful scenarios that are at once seductive and deeply disturbing. Swathed in his trademark batik fabrics – Indonesian influenced material imported into Africa by Dutch traders – they raise serious questions about colonialism, identity, and power.

Aptly titled *Dreaming Rich*, Shonibare’s first solo show in Hong Kong explores the rampant materialism and soaring real-estate prices commonly associated with our city.



Alongside the dramatic life-size figures animating the gallery are monumental paintings and drawings dotted with luxury-brand logos. Most poignant are a series of works on paper that emerged from a collaboration with 20 homeless individuals. Shonibare asked each of them what they would do if they won a million dollars and used extracts from their responses to create collages. Juxtaposed against images of gleaming skyscrapers, horse racing (“because that’s big here”) and wealthy individuals are touching statements from the homeless interviewees like, “I just want to have money to make dinner – that’s it!”

Shonibare created these works to raise awareness of caged-housing residents and those who can only afford to rent beds in crammed tenement blocks: “This, in fact, is a very serious subject; if we don’t collectively deal with it I guess we will end up with revolution again. Eventually people can only take so much pain before they rise up. So there are issues that we need to be aware of before we are just about to buy that Prada bag.”

When I meet Shonibare the next day for our interview, we’re ushered into the back offices of the gallery. “Oh, this is fun,” he says gliding past me on his wheelchair looking around the flashy room filled with whimsical furniture and loud paintings. One of his studio assistants offers to bring him a drink, but he shakes his head and sighs. “Gosh after what we’ve been through? Pearl Lam took us to a debauched lunch with lots of cakes,” he explains.

It’s an ironic way to begin our conversation on excess and indulgence, issues at the core of works like *Cakeman*. “It’s a contradiction, one that exists within myself,” the artist freely admits. “I do celebrate the good things and I, too, want to be wealthy. Who wants to be poor? At the same time, I don’t want to celebrate at the expense of people who don’t have that. It’s a dilemma because I can’t tell you I have the answer, but the point is to raise the issue.”

Born in 1962 into an affluent family in London, Shonibare moved to Lagos, Nigeria at the age of three and spent his childhood shuttling between the two cities. He returned to London when he was 17 to complete secondary school and went on to study art at



“NIGERIAN PARENTS DON’T WANT YOU TO BE AN ARTIST. MY BROTHER WAS A SURGEON AND ANOTHER BROTHER WAS A BANKER”

university, opting out of a law degree, to the dismay of his family. “Nigerian parents don’t want you to be an artist. My brother was surgeon and I had another brother who was a banker. I remember I used to run out of money after I graduated. I would go home a lot and my father would say, ‘I told you so,’” he recalls with a laugh. Yet Shonibare persisted with his dream, holding down a part-time job as an arts development officer to make ends meet, and devoting his weekends and free time to creating art.

Perhaps the first breakthrough in Shonibare’s career was triggered by a comment from one of his white college professors. Fascinated by global politics and the Cold War, Shonibare was working on the theme of perestroika when his teacher challenged his choice of subject matter. “He asked, ‘Why aren’t you producing pure African art?’” recounts Shonibare. “As someone who grew up in Lagos and also in London, I couldn’t quite understand what he meant.” Yet the comment stuck. Realising that he

would inevitably be categorised as an “African artist” and accused of either relying on or rejecting his culture, Shonibare began to search for ways of addressing his identity in a post-colonial, globalised world.

In the early ’90s, he discovered Dutch wax-printed batik fabric sold in African shops in Brixton market and began experimenting with the material. Shonibare was fascinated by the colonial trade routes of the fabric originating in 19th century Europe, and people’s misperceptions of the material as authentically African. He began using the batik for canvases, producing brightly patterned paintings, and soon created his signature Victorian aristocratic

costumes. Mining the Western art-historical-canon he subverted classical artworks by Gainsborough and Fragonard, dressing characters from their paintings in his vivid costumes, transforming them into something with his own stamp.

In 1998, he ventured into photography, using himself as a protagonist in elaborately staged works. In *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, a series of large-scale images, he appeared as a black upper-class dandy in fictional Victorian-era scenarios with white underlings fawning over him. Blown up into posters for the London underground, the series received enormous attention. “I did that because I studied history of art and every time I saw a black person in a painting they were always servants, so I kind of felt that I wanted to turn things around,” he explains. “The images had a huge impact because people were trying to work out if that man actually existed or if it was for a film.”

Shonibare was fascinated by the idea of a dandy as an outsider who challenges the



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE:
DIARY OF A VICTORIAN DANDY;
19.00 HOURS; WIND SCULPTURE 1;
CHAMPAGNE KID INSTALLATION

system “in a subtle way.” Taking a similar approach, he likens his work to a Trojan horse. While it comes packaged in whimsical and fun disguises, there is always a dark undercurrent lurking beneath. “If you protest and make protest art, people will take offence to it, really. Whereas if you wrap it up in a nice wrapper like...” he pauses searching for a word. “Like cake?” I offer. He

nods. “They won’t argue too much, they’ll just say, ‘Oh, what lovely cakes,’” he says in mock high-pitched voice. “The idea of play is important, so people can feel light when they see the works and realise later that the artist is dealing with a serious subject. Once they start peeling back the layers they realise: ‘What the hell am I looking at?’”

This strategy has allowed Shonibare to get

away with the most provocative of subject matter. In 2002, for instance when he was invited to show at Documenta XI, he created *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, a large-scale installation that was essentially a mass orgy of his batik-clad mannequins engaged in various explicit sex acts. “I needed to get people’s attention,” he shrugs. While it wasn’t obvious at first glance, the work was a critique of the lecherous activities of privileged European travellers on the grand tour, with uncomfortably relevant parallels to sex tourism in places such as Thailand today. “It isn’t necessarily about sex, it’s about power,” observes Shonibare. “That’s human nature. There are these kind of power relations between places.”

The struggle for power between cultures and individuals is a theme that has preoccupied Shonibare since that fateful day in art school when he was pigeonholed as a black artist by his professor. Before our interview ends, I work up the courage to ask about his greatest challenges and how his disability has affected his journey. Given his brazen approach to his practice and fearlessness in challenging the status quo, Shonibare’s response isn’t surprising. “Obviously that’s the situation I’m in. So rather than fight that, I’ve adapted,” he says humbly. “I’ve always seen so-called disadvantages as an opportunity.”