Locating the Individual: Theatricality, Realism, and Historical Engagement in the Photographic Work of Yinka Shonibare MBE

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LOCATING THE INDIVIDUAL: THEATRICALITY, REALISM, AND HISTORICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK OF YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

by

ANNE WEEMS

Under the Direction of Kimberly Cleveland, PhD

ABSTRACT

This essay is a study of Yinka Shonibare MBE, London-born and Nigerian-raised contemporary artist, and his recent photographic practice that includes three series: Fake Death Pictures, William Morris Family Album, and Medusa. Exploration of the series reveals insight into Shonibare’s unique relationship to photography, in which he employs the hyper-realism and theatricality of the medium to interact with individuals from British history and reveal contemporary social and political injustices.

INDEX WORDS: Photography, Textiles, Post-colonialism, Victorian Britain, Contemporary African art, Contemporary British art
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DEDICATION

This essay is dedicated to my parents, Dr. John and Amelie Weems, for their constant and loving encouragement.
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1 YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

London-born and Nigerian-raised artist, Yinka Shonibare is a name frequently uttered amidst the international contemporary art world. The artist, now honored with decorations of Master of the British Empire (MBE) and Royal Academician (RA) for his artistic achievement, is most recognized for his large-scale sculptural installations of manikins donning Victorian costumes constructed of wax batik fabric. The intricately constructed works are simultaneously beautiful and critical; they speak to the history of colonialism and its present-day legacy. While these bright and richly patterned textiles are considered stereotypically ‘African’ to a western audience, they are actually a byproduct of European colonialism. The fabrics are based on Indonesian printed batik design, which were industrially manufactured in Holland and England and then sold to their colonies in West Africa. Best known for his sculptural and installation works, Shonibare’s practice currently also includes painting, photography, film, and performance to examine the relationship between Europe and Africa and their political and economic histories. His wide-ranging practice is connected through his repeated orbit around the idea of cultural hybridity.

Shonibare, deeply interested in post-colonial relations and Victorian Britain, has turned specifically to photography in his recent focus on individuals from British history. Between 2011 and 2016, the artist produced three photographic series: Fake Death Pictures (2011), the William Morris Family Album (2014-2015), and Medusa (2015). In this essay, I will explore Shonibare’s choice to employ the photographic medium to depict individuals, as well as his desire to create a dialogue with both the history of Western art and current global social issues of race and class. The photographs add an important layer to his examination of the relationship between Europe and Africa and their political and economic histories. The images offer
poignant examples of the artist's attempts to subvert cultural purity, and contribute to his on-
going dialogue addressing current social and political issues. In these three photographic series, in particular, Shonibare asks his audience to question, and perhaps reconsider, the social and political legacy, as well as environmental aftermath, of the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment and the nineteenth century Victorian era and European imperialism of Africa.

In my investigation of three of Shonibare’s recent series, I will demonstrate that the photography allows the artist to more directly explore facets of identity, race, and perhaps, personal connections to the sources in which he engages. In comparison to his better-known works, the artist’s photographic works have been little discussed or researched, and I believe his work in this medium hold a great source of information to be extracted, offering particular insight that cannot be gleaned from the rest of his practice. Photography allows Shonibare a hyper-realistic setting in which to dramatize truths of colonial history, as well as the legacy of two golden centuries of Western white male power. Additionally, the individuals within his photographs allow him to play with and address issues of race in a more direct way than his sculptural works. While his sculptures are headless and largely nameless, the authenticity and realism associated with photography is a more apt tool for the artist to explore personal connections to specific histories of individuals and employ them as a device for presenting questions about larger histories.

While Shonibare’s photography is not simply a continuation of his renowned sculpture installations, I will also highlight connections to his larger practice, including overarching themes of colonialism and post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalization. The striking presence of Dutch wax fabrics, for example, unites his wide-ranging practice both aesthetically and ideologically. The photographic works, along with his work in other media,
utilize a balance of humor and critic to achieve a practice that is all at once aesthetically pleasing, seductive, intellectual, and socially aware.
2  FAKE DEATH PICTURES

Shonibare’s Fake Death Pictures (2011) (fig. 1-5) is a series of five photographs that borrow inspiration from death and suicide paintings from the Western art canon. There are a multitude of paintings of death and suicide in the Western art canon, such as Benjamin West’s Death of General Wolfe (1770) and Jacques Louis David’s Death of Marat (1793). Rather than look to these well-known works, Shonibare instead took influence from relatively lesser-known works from the 16th to 19th centuries. Within his recreations of these somewhat obscure paintings, Shonibare has replaced the dead or dying figure with the character of Lord Horacio Nelson. A celebrated admiral in the British Royal Navy, Nelson heroically died in the Battle of Trafalgar (Napoleonic Wars, 1805), sacrificing his life for a victory that secured the British Empire’s naval prowess and position in colonizing the East. He is remembered collectively as a national hero, an ideal that all British men should strive to emulate.

The Fake Death photographs, themselves, are scenes of death and suicide in the Victorian tableaux vivant style. The palpable staging and drama point to Shonibare’s tendency to accentuate the opulence and excess of the Victorian period, as well as the drama that came out of the grand style of history painting. In each photograph, the dead or dying Lord Nelson is the central figure, pictured either alone, in the act of taking his own life, or on his deathbed surrounded by servants and maids. He wears Shonibare’s iconic wax fabrics, which serve as representatives of the artist’s work as a whole in light of the fabric’s ironic, complex origins. The garments that Nelson wears in each photograph bear an obvious Victorian styling and cut, despite the fact that the earliest painting dates well before the Victorian era, to the sixteenth century. Art historian Michael Westfall explains that in creating all the photographs in a Victorian style, Shonibare “re-creates even older paintings, doubling, underscoring, or re-retracing the artist’s historical line of
inquiry.”¹ But while the five original paintings fit the theme of death, the question still begs, why did Shonibare choose these five from the entirety of the Western art canon?

Édouard Manet’s *Le Suicide* (1877) (fig. 6) is surprisingly unknown for the artist’s wide-ranging popularity and prestigious position in the history of Western art. The painting depicts a man – gun in hand – lying limply on a bed after presumably taking his life just moments before. The composition is closely cropped and the bedroom setting is sparsely adorned, offering the viewer little, if any, evidence as to the circumstances surrounding his death. In his essay, “Painted Theory of Art: *Le Suicide* (1877) by Édouard Manet and the Disappearance of Narration,” historian Ulrike Ilg explains that the painting is often overlooked or ignored because it does not fit neatly into Manet’s oeuvre, and is therefore difficult to address in relation to the majority of his work. Moreover, Ilg also suggests that the painting represents a shift in the visual representation of suicide, as it is one of the first to have been “delivered from most of the descriptive burden, and at the same time, also of the moralizing tendency which was so customary for the subject.”² In previous representations of suicide, a moralizing overtone was a crucial aspect of the genre. However, as romantic notions of the Victorian Age arose, depictions of taking one’s life came to be less moral lessons and more images of the tragic male hero or artist. In light of this shift, Shonibare’s choice to recreate this work makes his intentions in shaping the character of Lord Nelson as the flawed male hero of the British Empire quite clear.

Henry Wallis’ *The Death of Chatterton* (1856) (fig. 7) displays precisely these romantic notions of nineteenth century Victorian England, springing out from the previous century’s Age of Reason. The painting shows the corpse of a man at the prime of his youth, bathed in soft

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sunlight after taking his own life. Similar to Manet’s *Suicide*, the painting is not morally didactic. The man is the young poet Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770), who as a boy skillfully forged what he claimed to be medieval texts by copying his own writing onto old parchment. After his patron detected the forgeries, Chatterton moved to London and unsuccessfully sought his fortune by working as a writer and poet. Wallis’ painting was whole-hearted received by the public when it was first displayed at the Royal Academy in 1856, causing a powerful myth to arise around Chatterton as the “archetypal starving poet, a unrecognized genius, who had poisoned himself in despair.” Thus, it was through his death, not his life, that Chatterton finally achieved the fame he so desired. Citing Alena Marchwinksi of the Danish National Art Library, art historian Elizabeth Pergam explains that Wallis’ painting must be understood within the framework of the “romantic artist-myth: the suicide of this young and maltreated genius provides an important contribution to this very myth.” It is clear that nineteenth-century Romanticism brought with it a change in attitude about the notion of suicide and the tragic or flawed male hero, in this case an artist, whose death served to immortalize his fame.

Adding another layer of complexity and interpretation, Leonardo Alenza y Nieto’s *Satire of Romantic Suicide* (1839) (fig. 8) creates a parody of this desire to immortalize one’s own unrecognized genius. Alenza, who was working in Madrid, was likely familiar with the romantic notions of suicide sweeping Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, following the cult-like status surrounding William Chatterton’s death, along with the 1774 publication of Goethe’s semi-autobiographical novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, in which the young,

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4 Ibid.
heroic protagonist takes his own life. Alenza’s painting is a parody of a young poet guaranteeing his fame through self-inflected death. The scene depicts a young man, dramatically launching himself off a cliff, while simultaneously drawing a knife out to presumably stab himself. In anticipation of his immortalizing fame, he leaves behind a cross with a laurel crown, his writings, and a skull all of which symbolize his poetic talent and tragic preoccupation with death.6

In his choice of François-Guillaume Ménageot’s little-known work, the *Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I* (1781) (fig. 9), Shonibare moves away from depicting a single figure and suicide to a group image and the subject of natural death. Ménageot’s painting has as it’s subject a man who, of course, is widely known as one of the greatest masters of Western art, a tradition dominated by ideas of the (white) male hero. The painting depicts Leonardo on his death bed surrounded by a group of attendants. The bedroom is unlit, but the central Leonardo is bathed in warm light coming from a back room. The surrounding figures are either partially or fully obscured by the dark shadowed cast in the bedroom. The only attendant that is fully lit is the woman in front of the door, in the left foreground, holding a cup out for Leonardo. In Shonibare’s version of *Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I*, this woman is shifted to a more central position in the composition and bears wings, as if she is an angel. The large, starkly white wings stand out prominently against the largely dark scene. In Ménageot’s original, it is unclear whether the same woman is winged (see fig. 9, far left). Shonibare’s decision to either highlight or add the bright white wings to the woman waiting on Leonardo perhaps speaks to the saintly status we afford the great masters, the white male heroes, of Western art history. By replacing Leonardo with Lord Nelson, Shonibare is undoubtedly calling attention to tradition of Western art and perhaps asking us to question its rarely challenged validity.

6 *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, 86.
In addition, the artist François-Guillaume Ménageot was a successful history painter in Paris during his lifetime. He was approved as a history painter by the Grand Salon and is credited for contributing to the development of Neo-Classicism. The *Death of Leonardo da Vinci* was met with much praise when it was exhibited at the Salon in 1781. Ménageot is one of the painters who returned to the Grand Style of painting, with monumental architecture and sculptural form. The *Death of Leonardo da Vinci* shows traces of this style, horizontal in composition with dramatic lighting and grand gestures. The painting is also evidence of Ménageot status as a follower of Francisco Goya, an artist who has interested and influenced Shonibare as well. While at first the painting seems like an outsider in the series because the figure is not taking his own life, Goya serves to link Ménageot and Shonibare with the shared preoccupation with themes of death and darkness. Moreover, the inclusion of this painting ties the series to both the tradition of grand Western history painting and the Goya vein of romanticism. In Shonibare’s version, Lord Nelson dies a hero’s death, surrounded by a hoard of servants (including Shonibare himself), bathed in the dramatic light of so many paintings of Western Romanticism.

The real outlier in the series is Bartolomé Carducho’s *Death of St. Francis* (fig. 10), considering its 1593 date, far before the Victorian period or the development of Romanticism. The work is largely monochrome, painted in shades of neutral brown that fade to black in the darkest portions of the composition. The scene features a central, reclining St. Francis surrounded by a number of fellow monks. Unlike Ménagot’s *Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I*, the scene is absent of any richness or luxury. St. Francis lies on a raised, wooden pallet, and every figure dons the rough, wool robe of the Franciscan order. An

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8 Ibid.
elderly, bearded monk hand Francis a lit candle, the only noticeably light source in the room. Next to St. Francis sit a skull, an hourglass, and a rosary, signs of death, the passing of time, and Catholic faith.

Carducho’s monochrome death scene is certainly the most somber in Shonibare’s choices of inspiration. It is possible, however, that Shonibare included the painting as another playful parody. By inserting Lord Nelson into the place of St. Francis, he is slyly highlighting the difference between the two historical male figures. St. Francis is famous for his stewardship toward nature, and is remembered as a gentle man who aimed to treat all living beings with respect and love. Lord Nelson is also remembered as an honorable and sacrificial man, but with ultimate goals of conquest and invasion. Both men have been immortalized as ‘male heroes,’ but in reality were working toward opposing goals. St. Francis desired a world in which all beings coexisted in equal harmony, while Lord Nelson wanted the British Empire to rule – physically, economically, and politically – over a large portion of the Eastern world. On the other hand, Shonibare may also be suggesting a different kind of parody. The inclusion of a Christian saint’s death portrait could be a nod to the common moral justification of colonization through missionary work, turning ‘savage peoples’ into civilized Christians. Either way, the original painting is steeped in tradition, and in Shonibare’s version, the artist himself again emerges from the shadows, slyly asking the audience to question the image in front of them.

While a handful of reviews and articles address the *Fake Death Pictures*, a relatively new series in the artist’s oeuvre, his choice of these five relatively little-known paintings in particular is not included in the discussion. It is noteworthy, however, that Alenza’s *Satire of a Romantic Suicide* and Wallis’ *Death of Chatterton* were both featured in the *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century* exhibition at the National Gallery in London.
2008. Shonibare, based in London, may have seen these two paintings together at this exhibition at the National Gallery a few years prior to beginning the *Fake Death Pictures*, which can perhaps help to answer why the artist chose these works for the series. View these two works could have, perhaps, prompted Shonibare to seek out other lesser-known works to compliment the two included in the exhibition.

Shonibare’s recreations of the *Satire of a Romantic Suicide* and the *Death of Chatterton* are arguably the most pivotal in the *Fake Death* series, displaying precisely the irony-drenched drama of the flawed male hero that the artist is attempting to highlight. The irony of the flawed male hero takes the form of the tragic, Romantic poet’s death in both works. Alenza’s poet dies an overdramatized, over-planned ‘double death,’ while Wallis’ Chatterton throws away his youth and talent for a legacy that he will never have the opportunity to enjoy. The addition of the hyper-realism and staged drama of photography in Shonibare’s recreations allow the artist to turn irony into parody. He cleverly hint at a political critique of the cultural and historical immortalizing of the young, fearless men, the ‘tragic heroes,’ who died for the cause of colonizing and invading other peoples, while retaining the lighthearted nature of his oeuvre, which upon first glance is visually frivolous and decadent. Moreover, by drawing from Alenza’s humor to insert all of the scenes in the *Fake Death Pictures* with the obvious disruption of the bright wax fabrics, the over-staged drama, and the hyperrealism of the photographic medium, Shonibare allows all five works in the series to transform into parody.

Shonibare’s intention with the *Fake Death Series* is multi-layered, as he is not only speaking to the death of a singular man, but also the death of a political ideology. Michael Westfall eloquently explains the effect that the artist achieves – “Nelson dies not once but five

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9 In the exhibition catalog of *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*, the two paintings are listed (and presumably were displayed) consecutively as works 20 and 21.
times. A victim of self-directed overkill, he shoots himself, he poisons himself, he flings himself from a crag. Even in an imagined, ‘fake’ history, the ultimate end to every story is death.\textsuperscript{10} Shonibare intends for the dramatized message of ultimate death to come full circle in light of the contemporary political climate. The over-staged, hyper-realistic pictures, in effect, are a conflation of the personal and the political. The individual of Lord Nelson is a representative of the ex-colonial Western powers, the (now tragic) male heroes of history. Shonibare wishes to illuminate the fact that while the Western powers are slowly falling into economic crisis, a number of their previous colonies, such as Nigeria, Kenya, and Indonesia,\textsuperscript{11} are rising economically. In terms of global power, the tables are turning from the colonizer to the previously colonized. The figure of Lord Nelson, the representative hero of the white male empire, presented in recreations of paintings by artists from such colonizing nations, no longer resonates.\textsuperscript{12}

Moreover, Shonibare is suggesting that strict ideologies of this ‘white male past’ (i.e. Fascism, Communism, Marxism) are no longer true and have instead been replaced by a level of skepticism and cautiousness. People are no longer willing to blindly follow the heroic figure or idealized ideology; they have begun to question all heroic certainties. Shonibare considers this questioning to be a metaphor for the demise of the ex-colonial powers and certainties.\textsuperscript{13} It is at this contemporary juncture where Shonibare chooses to insert these rising Eastern powers, the ex-colonized, into a photographed, hyper-realistic version of Western art canon. By way of non-white individuals and wax batik fabric, Shonibare includes these ‘others’ as a part of a visual

\textsuperscript{10} Westfall, "Yinka Shonibare Mbe: Addio Del Passato," 150.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
history in which they have been previously rarely represented, and if so only as victims or savages.
Figure 1: Yinka Shonibare, *Fake Death Picture (The Suicide – Manet)*, 2011
Digital chromogenic print, 148.59 x 180.98 cm, James Cohan Gallery, New York

Figure 2: Yinka Shonibare, *Fake Death Picture (The Death of Chatterton – Henry Wallis)*, 2011
Digital chromogenic print, 148.91 x 180.98 cm, James Cohan Gallery, New York
Figure 3: Yinka Shonibare, *Fake Death Picture (The Suicide – Leonardo Alenza)*, 2011
Digital chromogenic print, framed: 193.99 x 148.91 cm, James Cohan Gallery, New York
Figure 4: Yinka Shonibare, *Fake Death Picture (The Death of Leonardo da Vinci in the Arms of Francis I – Francois-Guillaume Ménageot)*, 2011
Digital chromogenic print, 149.23 x 184.47 cm, James Cohan Gallery, New York

Figure 5: Yinka Shonibare, *Fake Death Picture (The Death of St. Francis – Bartolomé Carducho)*, 2011
Digital chromogenic print, 148.91 x 198.12 cm, James Cohan Gallery, New York
Figure 6: Édouard Manet, *The Suicide*, 1877
Oil on canvas, 38 x 46 cm, Foundation E.G. Bührle, Zurich, Switzerland

Figure 7: Henry Wallis, *The Death of Chatterton*, 1856
Oil on canvas, 62.2 x 93.3 cm, Tate Britain, London, England
Figure 8: Leonardo Alenza y Nieto, *Satire of the Romantic Suicide*, 1839
Oil on canvas, 36 x 28 cm, Museum of Romanticism, Madrid, Spain
Figure 9: François-Guillaume Ménageot, *Death of Leonardo da Vinci (in the Arms of Francis I)*, 1781
Oil on canvas, 278 x 357 cm, Musée de l'Hôtel de Ville, Amboise, France

Figure 10: Bartolomé Carducho, *Death of St. Francis*, 1593
Oil on canvas, 115 x 153 cm, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon, Portugal
3 WILLIAM MORRIS FAMILY ALBUM

In the William Morris Family Album series (2014-2015), Shonibare moves away from a single historical subject and the recreation of paintings to multiple members of an historical family while maintaining the original medium of photography. While their inaugural exhibition at the William Morris Gallery also included a selection of Shonibare’s costumes created for individuals in the photographs, the series itself is small, comprised of only three photographs. The works are recreations of photographs of the Victorian era, from the family albums of nineteenth-century textile designer William Morris. A number of the individuals wear clothes typical of the time and true to the original photographs. Others retain the same styling and cut, but add bright punches of color and pattern in an otherwise muted environment with Shonibare’s iconic wax fabric.

As consistent with much of Shonibare’s photographic practice, the contemporary individuals in the photographs represent specific individuals from Western (particularly British) history. The group image is a double family portrait of the Morris family, as well as the family of William’s close friend and collaborator, Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones (fig. 11). The original photograph was taken in the garden of The Grange, the Burne-Jones family home in Fulham, West London, where Morris and his family were regular guests. Clockwise, from the far right, are Jenny Morris (daughter), Janey Morris (wife), Georgiana Burne-Jones, Philip Burne-Jones, Margaret Burne-Jones, Edward Burne-Jones, May Morris (daughter), and William Morris.14 The group is tightly posed in mix of seated and standing positions. A majority of the participants look directly ahead, while a couple individuals gaze out beyond the scope of the camera. In Shonibare’s version, the participants mimic the poses of those in the original photograph, with the grounds of the previous Morris family home as a backdrop. Six people

wear the traditional nineteenth century clothing true to the original, and three others interrupt the muted scene with lively pops of wax fabric costumes. The woman who poses as Janey Morris is a particularly prominent figure within the scene, wearing a striking, bright green batik fabric dress against her dark skin and locking eyes with the audience in what appears to be an expression of concentrated attentiveness.

The remaining two photographs are single and double portraits featuring two of William Morris’ sisters, Isabella and Alice, pictured with her husband (fig. 12-13). The older woman who represents Isabella is seated alone with a newspaper, and bears a striking resemblance to Morris’ sister. Unlike the original, her serene character is surrounded with a flood of bright colors; the green background, red chair, and batik fabric dress all compete for the viewer’s attention. Morris’ other sister, Alice, is photographed standing next to her presumed husband. Little biographical information exists about Alice Morris, but this portrait is typical of husband and wife, particularly newlyweds, and the woman taking the place of Alice is wearing a wedding band. She wears the traditional Victorian dress and lace shawl of original photograph, with the addition of a hijab adorning her head. For the woman who plays Alice, the hijab is not a costume for her, rather part of her daily dress. Alternatively, the man who plays her husband looks ethnically similar to the white, British man in the original photograph, while his costume is a bright mixture of colorful batik fabrics. Shonibare has flipped East and West in this instance, placing traditional Western dress on an ethnically Eastern woman and what is considered African fabric on a white man.

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15 Isabella was a deaconess who spent much of her time with the poor, carrying out the work of Morris’ socialist ideals. “Yinka Shonibare Mbe: The William Morris Family Album (Films 1-3),” (Walthamstow, London: William Morris Gallery, 2015).
16 In the original photograph, Alice appears to be wearing a wedding band, as well. The other possibility is that the man is William Morris Senior, as he bears a slight resemblance to the siblings’ father in his 1824 portrait by T. Wheeler in 1824, now housed at the William Morris Gallery.
17 “Yinka Shonibare Mbe: The William Morris Family Album (Films 1-3)."
Alice’s contemporary stand in and her husband, along with all of individuals who play William Morris’ family and close friends in the *Family Album* series are residents of the town of Walthamstow. The town is home to the William Morris Gallery, a Georgian house, which was the Morris family home from 1848 to 1856. Located in Northeast London, present-day Walthamstow is now a particular ethnically diverse town, a distinction that Shonibare highlights in his choice of actors. The artist’s choice to do so stems from his desire to present a social comparison between William Morris’ time and the present day. Such a diverse population of Walthamstow did not exist in nineteenth century London. The ethnic minorities in Shonibare’s version are decidedly absent in an upper-middle class family portrait of the Victorian area. He states:

> Primarily this project is about time, and it’s about how time has actually evolved between William Morris’ time and the present day and the change in population… Walthamstow was very different then, and the area is very diverse now. There are people of different cultures. I wanted to bring the public into the museum. I wanted to do a project that would actually be diverse and engage with the diverse community there. I felt that that project is very much in line with ideals of William Morris himself.\(^\text{18}\)

Shonibare employs a number of tactics in the *William Morris Family Album* project in order to articulate the passing of time between the Victorian era and present day. Firstly, he is employing the realism of photography to present a social difference between Victorian England and its contemporary counterpart by recreating nineteenth century English portraits with individuals who represent diverse cultures. Secondly, as has become more frequent in his recent work, the artist is developing more of a social practice, engaging with the community by intertwining his practice with the public. Thirdly, in the above quotation Shonibare reveals his purposeful engagement with the historic figure of William Morris. Morris, unlike many of the Victorian-era

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
individuals that Shonibare represents, did not stand for many the Victorian values that the artists cleverly subverts in much of his work (a readily available example being the Fake Death Pictures). Living and working a half-century after Nelson, Morris played a drastically different role in his contributions to the Empire.

William Morris, born in Walthamstow, London in 1834, was a designer and artist who influenced an entire generation of designers and architects through his emphasis on decorative honesty and truth to materials. Morris and his collaborators established the artists’ cooperative Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. in 1861, producing a variety of decorative work. He later took over the venture, which became known as Morris & Co. and is still in operation today, producing fabric, wallpaper, and home accessories from his own original designs. Morris found his true passion in patterns and pattern making, striking a clear similarity to Shonibare. Not only was Morris vehement about quality materials and production, he was also a proponent of improving working conditions and equal, cooperative workplaces. Later in his life, Morris would go on to become a key figure in the early socialist movement in Britain, garnering inspiration from both Marxist theory and anarchism. Morris worked to close the economic gap exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution and campaign for an egalitarian society. In his New from Nowhere, now considered a classic of Utopian literature, he writes that his vision for a future Britain was a place “where art, peace, decency, and harmony with nature have triumphed.” In the William Morris Family Album, perhaps, Shonibare is presenting his contemporary audience with an image of Walthamstow as William Morris would have envisioned his hometown, with a diversity and equality of multiple ethnicities, splattered with exuberantly patterned fabrics that the designer so loved.

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Figure 11: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The William Morris Family Album*, 2015
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and The Church of England Record Centre

Figure 12: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The William Morris Family Album*, 2015
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and The Church of England Record Centre
Figure 13: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The William Morris Family Album*, 2015
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and The Church of England Record Centre
In his most recent series, *Medusa*, Yinka Shonibare returns to the canon of Western art, once again utilizing a painting for inspiration. The four works are photographic recreations Caravaggio’s famous portrait of the mythological figure, *Medusa*, (1597) (fig. 14) which hangs in the Uffizi Galley, Florence. The photographs, individually titled *Medusa South*, *Medusa East*, *Medusa North*, and *Medusa West* (2015) (figs. 15-18). The works are compositionally identical to the sixteenth-century Italian master’s original, photographic versions of a tondo, a circular form of painting closely tied to the tradition of the Renaissance. The works feature a decorative border framing the central, screaming Medusa just moments after she is beheaded. Her upper body wrapped in a dark, roughly textured fabric that blends into the empty, black background. In Shonibare’s contemporary versions, women of different ethnicities, European, Asiatic, Indian and African, representing the four global quadrants, pose as the four Medusas. Instead of live serpents, their heads are wrapped in snakes made from batik fabrics.

In Greek mythology, Medusa was one of three sister Gorgons. Gorgons have been depicted in ancient Greek vase painting and sculpture as, “winged women with broad round heads, serpentine locks of hair, large staring eyes, wide mouths, the tusks of swine, lolling tongues, flared nostrils, and sometimes short coarse beards.” Subsequent works from the late classical period often depicts a humanized version of Medusa, with the face of a beautiful woman and her head wrapped in coiled snakes. Those who gazed upon Medusa’s face would turn to stone. In order to defeat her, Perseus, under the order of King Polydectes of Seriphus,

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20 The portrait hanging in the Uffizi has recently been discovered to not be Caravaggio’s original version of Medusa. There are actually two versions of Medusa attributed to Caravaggio, the earlier version only being discovered recently. Perhaps, Shonibare may have been drawn to this work to again remind the audience that authenticity and originality is not always as straightforward as (Western art) presents it to be. See Mina Gregori, "Caravaggio's First "Medusa"," in *La Prima Medusa: Caravaggio*, ed. Ermanno Zoffili, et al. (5 Continents: Milan, 2011).

beheaded Medusa by using a mirrored shield. The shield, gifted by the goddess Athena, allowed Perseus to slay the Gorgon by looking at her reflection without catching her fatal stare.  

A number of artistic representations of this climatic interaction, such as Caravaggio’s versions, along with a supposed early work by Leonardo da Vinci, depict the reflection of Medusa’s horrified face on the shield, moments after she is beheaded. At the time of her demise, Medusa was pregnant by Poseidon, the god of the sea, and when she fell dead, their children Pegasus and Chysaor emerged from her body. Medusa herself also carries associations with the sea. The poet Hesiod imagined the Gorgons as “reef-creating sea-daemons, personifications of the deadly submerged reefs which posed such a danger to ancient mariners.”

Medusa’s ominous relation to the sea becomes more significant in the scope of Shonibare’s practice with the connection to the French ship named after the mythological Gorgon. The Medusa, or the Medusé, made famous in the Western art historical canon by Théodore Géricault in his painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) (fig. 19), was a French Naval warship that sailed in the Napoleonic Wars, the same time period in which Lord Nelson died. Shonibare’s interest in the historic ship began well before this most recent series, having previously incorporated the war vessel into his practice with his 2008 work entitled *Le Medusé*. With this project, Shonibare created a three-dimensional model of the ship complete with batik fabric sails, as well as a dramatically staged photographic image of the model. The ship, launched in 1810, was used to secure the French Indian Ocean territories, and later in raids in the Caribbean. Medusa met her ultimate demise wrecking on a colonialist expedition en route to Senegal, West Africa. The inexperienced captain, who secured his position only as

\[\text{22 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{23 Giorgio Vasari notes that as a young man, Leonardo painted the head of a Medusa on a wooden shield. *Vita di Leonardo* (1568).}\]
\[\text{24 “Medousa and the Gorgones.”}\]
compensation for past political service, and his officers took the rescue boats for themselves, leaving many passengers and soldiers to fend for themselves on a make-shift raft made from leftover scraps after the Medusa’s construction. The cannibalism and death that took place in the aftermath on the raft was unsuccessfully covered up by French government, and is remembered as a horrific scandal.\textsuperscript{25} The ship’s legacy is complicated by discrepancies, muddled by the time between the wreck and its written recording, and tainted by powerful, political agendas.\textsuperscript{26} The wreck of the Medusa is an event heavily intertwined in the history of Victorian Age and colonialism, and perhaps speaks more generally to the all too common Western whitewashing of the violence and terror inherent in colonialism.

Furthermore, the noticeable ethnic diversity of the four \textit{Medusas} allows the photographic series to be understood as a continued reflection upon global and racial stereotypes, as well as the construct of cultural purity that Shonibare repeatedly subverts in his practice. \textit{Medusa}, for example, contains a number of similarities to his photographic series \textit{The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters}. The 2008 photographs are a reworking Francisco de Goya’s 1799 etching, yet another work from the Western art canon. As do the four \textit{Medusas}, the five photographic variations of the original etching each represent a world continent – Europe, Africa, America, Asia, and Australia. The sleeping figures in \textit{The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters} and those in the \textit{Medusas}, however, do not all correspond with their stereotypical region of the world. In \textit{The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters}, a white man represents the African continent, while an African man represents Asia. Similarly, in the \textit{Medusa} series, the African woman is \textit{Medusa West}, the European woman is \textit{Medusa South}, and the Indian woman is \textit{Medusa North}. Rachel Kent explains, “These images bring together the concerns that have shaped Shonibare’s art since


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., xiv.
the mid-1990s with their breaking down of the grand narratives and contamination of ideas."^{27}

Employing the participation of individuals with the medium of photography, the artist pairs some, but not all, of his models’ ethnicities with an unexpected continent or region of the world. Shonibare quietly asks his audience to question why they perceive something wrong with the image and why that is important and/or necessary. Inspired in part by disconnect between the multiculturalism in modern day London and his ‘outsider’ status as a black artist there, Shonibare is asking viewers to consider the, often subconscious, effects of stereotyping and the construct that is cultural purity.

The *Medusas* were first exhibited in a body of his work entitled *Rage of the Ballet Gods*, in which the artist continues his well-known approach of employing historical events as metaphors with which to explore and reconsider current geo-political and social conditions.\(^28\) This body of work, however, extends Shonibare’s concerns into the environmental realm. An excerpt from the inaugural exhibition at James Cohen Gallery, Shonibare’s representation in New York, explains further:

…*Rage of the Ballet Gods* points to the progress of rational thought—a legacy of the Age of Enlightenment—that underlies the scientific advances propelling us towards environmental doom. Inspired to make a poetic statement, Shonibare turns to mythology to uncover this paradox.\(^29\) In this most recent body of work, the artist is using mythological history to highlight that the long lasting effects of the Industrial Revolution that sprung from the Enlightenment are also environmental in nature.\(^30\) The industrial and scientific innovations that brought the Western


\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.
world into the modern era, Shonibare is suggesting, are the same advances that will destroy our current environment, through side effects such as pollution, deforestation, and climate change.
Figure 14: Yinka Shonibare, *Medusa North*, 2015
Digital chromogenic print and bespoke wooden frame, 114 x 114 cm, James Cohan Gallery, NY

Figure 15: Yinka Shonibare, *Medusa East*, 2015
Digital chromogenic print and bespoke wooden frame, 114 x 114 cm, James Cohan Gallery, NY
Figure 16: Yinka Shonibare, *Medusa South*, 2015
Digital chromogenic print and bespoke wooden frame, 114 x 114 cm, James Cohan Gallery, NY

Figure 17: Yinka Shonibare, *Medusa West*, 2015
Digital chromogenic print and bespoke wooden frame, 114 x 114 cm, James Cohan Gallery, NY
Figure 18: Caravaggio, *Medusa*, 1597
Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 60 x 55 cm, Uffizi, Florence

Figure 19: Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818-1819
Oil on canvas, 491 x 716 cm, Louvre, Paris
5 INSPIRATION AND RECREATIONS

Upon exploring the three photographic series, a number of similarities arise that help to explain Shonibare’s diverse choices of inspiration – each allows the artist to engage in quiet social and political critiques while retaining a sense of humor, frivolity, and unexpectedness. Shonibare’s choice of Caravaggio’s painting, Medusa, for example, may be related to a common motif in his sculptural practice of ‘beheading’ the Victorian elite, what Rachel Kent asserts is a playful reference to the French aristocracy who met their fate at the guillotine. The artist’s tendency to engage in frivolity, humor, and the excess of the Victorian era is largely due to his self-described outsider status. In order to successfully encourage his audience to question the images he presents them with, he must uphold a level of unexpectedness, and according to Shonibare, such excess and opulence is not expected from an African artist or art associated with Africa. The generation working before him, the Black Art Movement that included Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper, engaged with political issues in a largely serious way, that some have interpreted as didactic. Shonibare, on the other hand, wants to approach art making from another angle, one free of any moralistic tone and which emphasizes frivolity and playfulness, but still with an underlying “inverted form of politics.”

The artist states:

When you think about Africa and about being an African artist, people most likely think about poverty and political struggle; they also think about independence and civil rights. None of these things actually sit well with the ideas of frivolity or excess so this returns us to notions of the unexpected. It is saying, ‘Look, I’m not going to be where you expect me to be, I’m not going to play victim, and I’m not going to play nature to your culture’ – the last phrase is a reference to Barbara Kruger’s work We Won’t Play Nature to Your Culture (1983) and the possibility of adopting a stance that questions not only the status quo but your own assumptions about that status quo.

32 Yinka Shonibare, "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare in Conversation with Anthony Downey," ibid., 44.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 46.
Bringing elements of the unexpected into his work is an important technique for Shonibare. Like the “miss-matched” ethnicities and global regions in the Medusa and The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters series, the ethnic minorities in the William Morris Family Album or the African wax fabrics paired with Western Victorian costumes in the Fake Death Pictures, almost all of the artist’s work will lure the viewer in with beauty, theatrically, and excess, and then their hold his or her attention just long enough for a realization of an inconsistency – something ‘not quite right’ – to arise. The medium of photography, in particular, allows for the inconsistency to be a switching, reversal, or interchange of race or ethnicity. For Shonibare, his work is most successful if it coaxes the audience to pause, question, or simply reflect upon the status quo – the contemporary status of the world, whether it be social, political, economic, geographic, or even environmental.

Not only is Shonibare questioning the environmental aftermath of the Enlightenment, but also its social and political effects. The time period is considered an age in which man was liberated from the “shackles of reason” and embraced the modern, empirical notions of science and rationality. Ideals of modern democracy were also established; yet, as Shonibare notes in conversation with writer and critic Anthony Downey, it is the arrogance of these democratic, liberal ideals that are now used as justification in a number of world conflicts. Such validations from this “transcendentalist notion of democracy” are hauntingly familiar to those set forth in the age of European imperialism.\(^{35}\) Citing the war in Iraq as an example, Shonibare lists the similarities: “they, the other, are an ‘uncivilized’ people, and we, enlightened Europeans that we apparently are, will endeavor to enlighten them.”\(^{36}\) The ‘others,’ in turn, often refuse to be ‘enlightened,’ and thus democracy is forced upon them. It is this absurdity – the war, conflict,

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\(^{35}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
and genocide – caused by the self-imposed superiority of the Western democracy that is at the very core of Shonibare’s quiet, yet biting, critique. He points out that the hallowed Age of Reason may not have been entirely reasonable, or at the very least, that its enlightened thinking may not have produced enlightened consequences.  

Similarly, Shonibare does not engage with the character of William Morris simply to glorify the diversity of present-day Walthamstow, or present-day England for that matter. In the *Family Album* series, the artist is also asking participants and viewers to consider William Morris’ ideals in light of current social and economic struggles, most significantly the gap between the rich and the poor. In speaking about the project, Shonibare mentions the recent inequality marches against poverty and the top one percent, such as the Occupy movement. He remarks, “I think it’s important to keep in mind that those inequalities or those subjects have been around since the Victorian era, and we don’t seem to have actually resolved them.” While Walthamstow may be more diverse today than in William Morris’ time, there are deep-seeded social inequalities, particularly related to race, from the Victorian era that still haunt contemporary society.

All the while, Shonibare is quick to follow up his opinions about the current economic climate with a caveat, reminding his audience of the nature of his practice, “…. as an artist, the purpose is not to stand on soapbox and make some party political point. The works are actually, in fact, a lot of fun to make… they are a form of fiction and exploring social issues, if you like, through fiction.” While photography allows for an added layer of ‘realness,’ it is important for Shonibare to retain a balance between social commentary, beauty, and parody. He often reminds

37 Ibid., 49-50.
38 The Occupy movement protests against social and economic inequality around the world. It began in the New York Financial district in 2011 and grew into an international movement.
39 "Yinka Shonibare Mbe: The William Morris Family Album (Films 1-3)."
40 Ibid.
his audience that being an artist is a form of dreaming, an escape from the trials and tribulations of the modern world. The William Morris Family Album, along with the entirety of his practice, remains firmly planted within the realm of fiction, depicting contemporary people playing roles within a historical setting in order to make his audience ‘do a double take’ and re-engage with what is in front of them. Shonibare’s goal is to playfully present people with visual revisionist readings of history.

The artist often also uses theatricality as a device to retain a sense of fiction in his work. All three of Shonibare’s recent series offer a heavy dose of theatricality, made all the more poignant through the medium of photography. While Shonibare is sly and understated with many messages in his practice, his setting of the stage within the hyper-real space of a photograph is overt. Individuals are carefully posed, expressions and gestures are often exaggerated, and the costuming, of course, is an impossible, other-worldly combination of nineteenth century Western Victorian cut and bright, bold, “African” fabrics. Such contradictions and fictions in the William Morris Family Album series allow the artist to again ask the audience to question the impossibility of the scenes he presents – a photograph of a nineteenth-century, ethnically diverse, British family, a portrait of a wealthy Victorian couple where the woman wears a hijab, and an image of an elderly, Christian deaconess dressed in loud batik fabrics. With such overt aesthetic choices, Shonibare remains understated with his political message: his presentation of the individuals who are excluded from certain, namely Western, histories.

The Medusa series, the William Morris Family Album, and the Fake Death Pictures series all embrace the theatricality of the photographic medium in order to make their viewers look twice. The images take the form of three very staged, purposeful types of photography: the

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tondo, a form closely tied to the tradition of Renaissance painting, in which the central figure is emphasized by a closely cropped, circular, ornate frame; the portrait, in which the family is carefully dressed and posed; and the Victorian tableaux vivant, which literally means “living picture,” and combines the qualities of on-stage art forms with photography. Moreover, the hyperrealism of each series offers an undeniable commentary on the aftermath of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and Western colonialism.

The photographs in the Medusa series, for example, each have the wide-eyed, horrified, expression of a real, individual woman, rather than a painted rendering of her. Their realness is emphasized by the subtle differences in each individual’s unnerving expression. The women scream in sheer, tangible terror as they are beheaded, alluding, perhaps, to the imminent environmental destruction and ongoing social and political struggles caused by the advanced of a hallowed, ‘enlightened’ time in which the white male’s rule and influence peaked. The William Morris Family Album series relies on the participation of real individuals who represent Walthamstow’s ethnic diversity. Their presence highlights the previous absence of minorities in such photographs of wealthy families and leisure activities from Victorian England. The satirical drama of the Fake Death Pictures allow the real individual playing the character of Lord Nelson to stand for much more than the death of one man; he becomes a personification of the ex-colonial Western (white male) powers. Unlike a painting, which is, in a sense, one step removed from historical events and can be appreciated simply as an aesthetically pleasing image, the realness of the photographs forces the audience to look twice and reconsider. The photographs do not allow the viewer to fully disassociate him or herself from the political and social realities of the Enlightenment and Imperialist eras, the golden age of the white male, and their longstanding legacies.
Such characteristics, those of engaging in quiet, social and political critiques while retaining a sense of humor, frivolity, and unexpectedness, paired with the simultaneous theatricality and *realness* of photography, reveal what seems to be a personal connection between Shonibare and the individuals with whom he chooses to engage. This engagement is specific to his photographic works, as they allow the artist to interact with and recreate specific individuals and identities, a trait that sets his photography apart from the rest of his practice. In the *Fake Death Pictures*, for example, Shonibare has chosen to insert Lord Nelson, a fellow Brit, into various paintings from the history of Western art. The admiral’s legacy has been immortalized in Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square, London, a location in which, interestingly enough, Shonibare’s own work – slyly critical of the Empire’s history – has also been displayed. Nelson is remembered as a national hero, for reasons tainted with colonial history, while Shonibare (MBE and RA) is currently considered a revered member of the Empire. Through personal parallels, Shonibare is reiterating his message in the *Fake Death Series*; the tables are turning between (ex)colonizer and (previously) colonized. Shonibare, a black-British artist, has fought against his outsider status, climbed his way to the top of British society, received some of the highest national honors, and exhibited his work in the same public space as Lord Nelson’s monument.

In the *William Morris Family Album*, Shonibare again engages with a well-known British man from the Empire’s golden era. His choice of Morris, however, does not reveal a role reversal, as with Nelson, but rather highlights career and ideological similarities between the two men. As previously mentioned, Morris was a British textile designer and producer – an obvious connection to Shonibare and his practice – as well as a socialist. Similar to Shonibare’s concerns with present-day social and economic inequality, Morris worked to close the economic gap
exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution and campaigned for an egalitarian society. In recreating photographs from Morris’ family albums to include the iconic wax fabric, Shonibare also appears to be drawing a comparison between forms of textile production. The artist’s batik textiles cleverly underscore the falsehood of cultural purity and the for-profit mass-production of batik fabrics during the colonization of Africa. Unlike his colonizing and industrializing counterparts of Victorian England, Morris’ commitment to handcrafted products was a challenge to the “mass-produced mediocrity” of the nineteenth century.42

The Medusa images do not reveal as obvious a personal connection with the artist, as Shonibare’s other two series clearly feature an individual male from British history, while the character of Medusa is a mythological female. The figure of Medusa, however, was, in a sense, an outsider similar to Shonibare’s status as a black British artist. She was the only mortal human of her three sisters, and was therefore targeted by King Polydektes.43 Additionally, Shonibare wears his hair in dreadlocks, which resemble the snakes on Medusa’s head (fig. 20). He has also been photographed with his dreadlocks wrapped in batik fabric (fig. 21), striking a clear similarity to the women in Shonibare’s recreation. These women scream in anguish for the impending social, political, and environmental doom, perhaps as stand-ins for both the figure of Medusa and Shonibare, who shares these same concerns for our contemporary world. The series, along with the Fake Death Pictures and the William Morris Family Album, engages directly, yet playfully, with identity, allowing for a more personal look into Shonibare’s practice, life, and societal concerns.

43 “Medousa and the Gorgones.”
A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

The balance of serious critique and playful theatricality, along with an undeniable aesthetic and extensive knowledge and engagement with history, sheds light on some of the immense success of Shonibare’s work – humor is at the heart of his practice. The artist explains:

Often, if you put these darker ideas in front of people, the instinct is to be defensive. But if you put… gleeful, playful things – opulent things – in front of people, the instinct is to engage because people feel happy. Then, of course, they might take another look and think, actually these things are not just inviting us to indulge, there are other levels. I find that am able to get people’s attention more if I go the playful route, even if it’s a terrible beauty. People want something that won’t frighten them immediately. Then they can look at it and ask, “am I complicit in this thing being presented to me?”

This notion of a “terrible beauty” applies to the images in *Fake Death Pictures*, *William Morris Family Album*, and *Medusa* series. One of Shonibare’s greatest artistic achievements is his ability to draw viewers in with beautifully arranged, meticulously tailored, and carefully posed works, and then, in a most clever and unobtrusive way, to nudge them to reconsider some of the “less palatable truths about the world in which we live.”

In relation to his larger practice, Shonibare’s recent photographic series further expose the *fabric*-action of cultural purity. The photographic realism certainly allows for more poignant references with their specific allusions to the Enlightenment era and British imperialism and their unresolved legacies, but the inclusion of Shonibare’s ever-present batik fabric also ties the works back to an overriding concern of hybridity in his practice, as he explains:

The hybridity in the works is a deliberate challenge to the notion of purity or authenticity; it’s a deliberate form of contamination into the idea of any kind of dominant prevailing ideology or culture. By bringing in elements from other cultures, I’m sort of challenging this idea of cultural

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45 Kent, "Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare Mbe," 11.
purity, and actually saying that the contamination or hybridization of objects will diminish the power of any one dominant idea. The layering is aesthetically complex, as well as ideologically complex. Those are things that go through my work generally.\textsuperscript{46}

The topic of cultural hybridity merits a deeper look at the batik fabrics that Shonibare uses in not only in his photographs, but also sculptures and installations. The textiles are based on Indonesian printed batik design, which were industrially manufactured for very little cost in Holland and England with the intent to be sold back to Indonesia, one of Holland’s colonies. The industrially manufactured prints, however, were not popular in Indonesia, so the Dutch then sold them to their West African colonies. At the time, the newly-colonized West Africans were being educated and moved into administrative type jobs in which they no longer had the time to hand weave their fabrics on a loom. The industrially printed fabrics, in turn, were a faster and cheaper alternative from which their colonizers could reap profit. Eventually, the manufacturing technology was transferred to West Africa, only after West African countries gained their independence in the 1960s, with the Dutch and English developing a textile-printing industry in most countries. To further support the cultural hybridity that Shonibare attempts to expose, he explains, “to add another layer of complexity, I purchased these fabrics… from Brixton Market in London, where they are popular with African-Europeans and black British people who want to identify with an idealized, invented homeland.”\textsuperscript{47} In short, Shonibare is suggesting that cultural purity is a construct, as these fabrics that people associate with ‘authentic Africa,’ were designed in Indonesia, manufactured by Europeans, sold to West Africans, and are now manufactured in West African and sold in London back to African-Europeans who wish to reconnect with that very constructed authenticity.

\textsuperscript{46} Peña and Shonibare, "A Terrible Beauty: Politics, Sex, and the Decline of Empire," 19.
\textsuperscript{47} Janet A. Kaplan and Yinka Shonibare, "Give & Take Conversations," \textit{Art Journal} 61, no. 2 (2002): 82.
It is here where one locates the connection between Shonibare’s insistence on deconstructing cultural purity and his appropriation of works from the history of Western art into “terrible beauties.” The photographs break down such notions by inserting ethnic minorities and disruptive, yet beautiful, ‘African’ fabrics into carefully crafted images of Victorian leisure, into the canon of Western art history, and in place of white male heroes. These insertions do not take the form of the artist’s well-know generic manikin sculptures, but rather real individuals. Shonibare’s recent photographic series serve to emphasize the irrelevancy of the Greenbergian romantic concept of the artist as God, originator, or (male) hero in the contemporary, globalized world. In the words of the prominent Nigerian art critic, writer, and curator Okwui Enwezor,

Shonibare’s works subvert the “widely accepted essentialism that says utility=low=African and art=high=European… what could be understood within western modernist thought as the opposition between tradition and modernity, post-coloniality and post-modernity; between acculturated and the unacculturated.”

Enwezor continues:

But such neat demarcations of cultural and representational value are themselves fictions, a kind of ground clearing gesture, which at all costs attempts to keep impurities out of the cleansed grid of the modernist white cube. However, it is this very antiseptic white cube that Shonibare’s work attacks with joyful irony and contaminates, and in doing he cuts directly into the kinds of myths that underlie the modernist project, and by extension that myth that these fabrics are signs of a cultural tradition.

Shonibare instead uses his photographs to turn these ideas on their heads (since, in the case of photography, he isn’t quite literally removing them). By incorporating the Dutch wax fabric, he is not only inserting a stereotypical ‘non-Western’ element into the Western art context, but he is also highlighting current global issues of class structure. His fabrics, from the realm of working-

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49 Ibid.
class markets and popular culture, are now part of the ‘high art’ world, a world that traditionally has not included their typical buyers.

For Shonibare, the racism and exploitation that has existed throughout global history and carries on today is due to an arbitrary distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ that inevitably results in stereotyping. His subtle disruption of traditional Western paintings invites viewers in and subsequently allows them to both question the polarized positions of good and bad and challenge the stereotypes in front of them. Instead of resorting to a didactic, moralistic approach, Shonibare creates a work that is both terrifyingly beautiful and beautifully terrible in his decadent, and self-admittedly indulgent, depiction of the opulence of Victorian European culture. He embraces the gentlemanly realm in order to most poignantly subvert it:

.... When people see an artist of African origin, they think: oh, he is here to protest. Yes, okay, I am here to protest, but I am going to do it like a gentleman. It is going to look very nice. You are not even going to recognize that I am protesting, you are going to invite me to your museum because the work is nice, and then when I am inside it is too late. But I have to do it nicely – because if I am already coming to you with a knife, you’re going to send me away.  

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51 Ibid., 41.
WORKS CITED


