Staging Display in the Sculptural Work of Yinka Shonibare MBE

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Art History

by

Courtney Tanner Wilder

June 2011

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Malcolm Baker, Chairperson
Dr. Elizabeth Kotz
Dr. Jeanette Kohl
The Thesis of Courtney Tanner Wilder is approved:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
Acknowledgments

My first acknowledgment must be to Dr. Leonard Folgarait, without whose encouragement and assistance I would not have begun this adventure back into the world of academics, and whose example has provided constant inspiration throughout the subsequent journey. Also, I thank Mark Scala for allowing me to tag along at the Frist Center for the Arts, and for mentioning an artist named Yinka Shonibare who I might look into. Completing my degree wouldn't have been possible without the academic support of Dr. Malcolm Baker, Dr. Françoise Forster-Hahn, Dr. Jeanette Kohl, Dr. Liz Kotz, Dr. Susan Laxton, Dr. Patricia Morton, Dr. Kristofer Neville, and the rest of the Department of the History of Art at UC Riverside. Moral support, encouragement and inspiration from my peers and friends proved equally important, and for that I thank especially Melinda Brocka, Cameron Crone, Rebecca Johnson, Elizabeth Osenbaugh, Caroline Owen, Tuija Parikka, Masha Rotfeld, Clint Tatum, Melissa Warak, and Austin Wilkinson. Thanks are also due to all who offered feedback on versions of this project presented at various symposia.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Mike & Karen Wilder, who deserve the biggest thanks of all.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Staging Display in the Sculptural Work of Yinka Shonibare MBE

by

Courtney Tanner Wilder

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in Art History
University of California, Riverside, June 2011
Dr. Malcolm Baker, Chairperson

The work of contemporary British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE is widely described as theatrical. This characteristic is especially present in the most well-known segment of his practice: his work in three dimensions, which often stages headless mannequins wearing copies of early modern costume in alternatively amusing, alluring, and disturbing tableaux vivantes. Shonibare's status as a self-described "post-colonial hybrid" manifests itself in the fabrics his figures are clothed in. The bold, colorful and undeniably vernacular Dutch wax-printed fabrics superimpose notions of Africa and colonialism onto notions of Europe, while simultaneously questioning the supposed authenticity of such notions. There has yet to be an in-depth study of the ways in which his works function as three-dimensional objects, in terms of the figures themselves as well
as the enhanced and altered meanings their display in various types of spaces engenders. This thesis proposes such a study, focusing on three instances of display. These case studies will be set against a background of the theory that predominated at the time of Shonibare’s artistic formation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as the debates of that time surrounding the display of both national heritage and the material culture of the "Other."
# Table of Contents

Introduction.................................................................................................................1  

Chapter 1..................................................................................................................18  

Chapter 2.................................................................................................................55  

Chapter 3.................................................................................................................77  

Conclusion...............................................................................................................98  

Bibliography.........................................................................................................102
List of Illustrations

Figure 0.1. Yinka Shonibare, MBE.
Figure 0.2. Dutch wax fabrics in Shonibare’s studio. Photo: ArtInfo.
Figure 0.3. Screenshot of Vlisco website.
Figure 0.4. Yinka Shonibare MBE. “Reverend on Ice,” 2005.
Figure 0.5. Sir Henry Raeburn, Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch, circa. 1795
Figure 1.1. Yinka Shonibare MBE, Mr. & Mrs. Andrews (without their heads), 1998
Figure 1.2. Yinka Shonibare MBE, Mr. & Mrs. Andrews (without their heads) (detail), 1998
Figure 1.3. Thomas Gainsborough, Mr. & Mrs. Andrews, 1748-49. Oil on canvas. National Gallery, London.
Figure 1.4. Marcel Duchamp, L.H.O.O.Q. 1919. Post card reproduction with added moustache, goatee and title in pencil.
Figure 1.5. Duane Hanson, House Painter I, 1984/1988. Epoxy resin, coloured with oil, mixed technique, accessories. Collection Hanson, Davie, Florida. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2010
Figure 1.6. Charles Ray, Male Mannequin, 1990.
Figure 1.7. Yasumasa Morimura, Daughter of Art History: Theatre B, 1990
Figure 1.8. Cindy Sherman, Untitled #193, 1989
Figure 1.9. Hiroshi Sugimoto, The Music Lesson, 1999.
Figure 1.10. Yinka Shonibare MBE. The Swing (After Fragonard). 2001
Figure 1.11. J.H. Fragonard, The Swing, 1766. Oil on canvas. The Wallace Collection, London.
Figure 1.12. Yinka Shonibare MBE, Diary of a Victorian Dandy, 19:00 hours, 1998
Figure 2.1. Jean Nouvel, Musée du Quai Branly (exterior), 2006.
Figure 2.2. Jean Nouvel, Musée du Quai Branly (permanent galleries), 2006.
Figure 2.3. J.H. Fragonard, The Pursuit, from The Pursuit of Love, oil on canvas, 1771-1772. Frick Collection, New York.
Figure 2.4. J.H. Fragonard, The Love Letters, from The Pursuit of Love, oil on canvas, 1771-1772. Frick Collection, New York.
Figure 2.5. J.H. Fragonard, The Lover Crowned, from The Pursuit of Love, oil on canvas, 1771-1772. Frick Collection, New York.


Figure 3.1. Yinka Shonibare MBE. *Mrs. Oswald Shooting*, as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007

Figure 3.2. Yinka Shonibare MBE. *Cl. Tarleton & Mrs. Oswald Shooting*, as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007

Figure 3.3. Yinka Shonibare MBE. *Cl. Tarleton & Mrs. Oswald Shooting* (detail), as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007

Figure 3.4. Yinka Shonibare MBE. *Cl. Tarleton & Mrs. Oswald Shooting* (detail), as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007

Figure 3.5. Yinka Shonibare MBE. *The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour*, 1996-97.
Introduction

“Any art work of significance, regardless of whether it embraces qualities that we see as sculptural or actively negates these, is caught up in a very basic contradiction, momentarily bringing to life alternatives to the pervasive reifications shaping the world of art and the world of everyday experience while also being embedded in these reifications.”
- Alex Potts¹

This project is a study of how the past is referenced by contemporary art in order to create new routes of viewing and ways of relating various notions of the past to the present. It necessarily also studies the ways in which contemporary art referencing the past is presented to viewers. The topic stems from my own interest in the past, particularly the eighteenth century. During the course of this study, I have had to question the roots of my own fascinations with things like period costumes, my interests in particular genres of art, and the extent to which my tastes have been shaped by established hierarchies. What began as an interest in studying painted portraiture from the Early Modern period has evolved into a complex project examining how contemporary sculpture from an outsider perspective views those two-dimensional Early Modern records of historic, aristocratic persons, as well as the three-dimensional “historic” museological and touristic re-creations of their world. Things become even more complex when addressing the display of such works in settings meant to redress the omissions of history and, more specifically, those of the history of art.

¹ “Introduction,” Modern Sculpture Reader, xxviii
The work of one contemporary artist – Yinka Shonibare MBE - both inspired the project and provides the material through which the above issues will be teased out. I will address several specific pieces within his expansive oeuvre in terms of their formal characteristics, while also analyzing how the works function on display and how they navigate the specific contexts in which they are placed.

Figure 0.1. Yinka Shonibare, MBE.

This introduction will touch on Shonibare’s biography, briefly discuss the substantial body of writing already building up around his work, and finally present several theoretical frameworks through which his practice emerged and which, in many ways, can be used to analyze it. These frameworks provide
important insight into both what his work is doing and how it accomplishes its
goals; they will be discussed in much greater depth in Chapter One, allowing the
case studies in Chapters Two and Three to be situated within, and expand upon,
this theoretical groundwork.

***

In 1991, British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE completed his
graduate studies in London at the theoretically inclined Goldsmiths' College.²
Damien Hirst graduated the year that Shonibare began, and amongst his
classmates were many of the "sensationalist" artists composing the group that
came to be known as the YBAs, or Young British Artists. While Shonibare would
participate in the exhibition that cemented this generation's dominance of the
international scene - Charles Saatchi's 1997 Sensation, held at the Royal
Academy - his approach to art had already become quite different from the
shock-driven mode in which many of his contemporaries were working: "Unlike
other British artists who emerged in the 1990s, Shonibare's tactic of disturbance
has been not to present something that we all recognize as shocking, but to

² The MBE was added to his name when, in 2005, he was appointed a Member of the Order of
the British Empire by Prince Charles – an honorific title that seems slightly ironic given some of
the critical views on empire and colonialism that his art expresses. Shonibare has said that the
addition of the MBE renders his name “a performance on the page” (Muller, 22).
present the shocking aspect of what is comfortably familiar, to de-familiarize the commonplace, and one of his principal weapons has been satirical humour.”

Shonibare is most well known for his use of brightly colored and boldly patterned African fabrics, which have found their way into the majority of his body of work. They form the canvases of his paintings, the skins and suits of his sculptures of aliens and astronauts, the sails of Nelson’s ship-in-a-bottle displayed atop Trafalgar Square’s fourth plinth and, most famously, the extravagant 18th and 19th century costumes that adorn headless mannequins. Pushing the sartorial cultural collision further, many of these latter works re-create canonical European paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries. In the finished garments, however, the fabrics, which are known as “Dutch Wax,” play something more than just the role of “Africa” in dialogue with the seemingly disparate concept of “Europe.” The fabrics are in fact a hybrid of these two

---

3 Fisher, 29
cultures, representing their interrelation, and also pointing to Shonibare’s multicultural upbringing.

During his studies in London, Shonibare, as a person who grew up in Nigeria but whose family maintained a residence in London, where he was born, realized that many expected him to make art that was somehow about being "African." Feeling neither wholly African nor British, Shonibare began to make art equally torn between the two cultures while also stressing their historic connection.

The perfect signifier presented itself in the guise of the Dutch wax fabrics. Originally inspired by Indonesian batiks, the Dutch created the fabrics in the 17th century to market to their East Indian colonies. Sales were slow, and so the Dutch tried pitching them to their West African colonies, where sales soared, aided in part by the import, and thus exotic, status the fabrics took on in that market. They are made of cotton, which is then printed using either a wax-transfer method in the highest quality versions (resulting in a print of equal intensity on both sides of the fabric) or a more standard fabric printing method in cheaper versions (rendering only one side printed). Nonetheless, whichever method is actually used, the name “Dutch wax” has come to describe all variants. Cotton itself was a colonial product, and was only used in European clothing once it could be imported from colonies such as America or India.\(^4\) Cotton was considered a luxurious import in early-modern Europe, adding a further layer of

\(^4\) Chrisman-Campbell, 18
significance to Shonibare's use of the material. In many ways then, these fabrics exemplify the circuitous routes of specifically colonial cultural exchange and influence, as well as the beginning of a globalizing economy.

Today the brightly colored, boldly and often symbolically patterned fabrics are produced in Africa as well as in England and Holland; considering this alongside their embrace by African independence movements of the 1960s and pan-African identity ideologies of the 1980s, their status is distinctly ambiguous: they have become both a "genuine" African article as well as a remnant of colonially-induced culture.

Shonibare favors the high-end variety made by Vlisco, which has been produced in Holland since the mid-19th century and is perhaps the best-known brand today. It is especially suited to Shonibare’s purposes because it is both a colonial and postcolonial product. While the Vlisco website shows sophisticated,
long and lean women of African descent wearing the fabric in “African”-style dresses and headwraps, the homepage also displays tiny British, Dutch and French flags, indicating the languages the site is available in, and providing a curious counterpart to the heavily Africanized marketing. Part of the fabric’s appeal is its foreign production for an export market, much as cotton and cashmere products were seen by 18th and 19th century Britons; they couldn’t get enough of “exotic” items like Kashmirian shawls that were only partly authentic, as they were made for export and tailored to British and European tastes. Today Vlisco, a company that once specialized in exports, also sells their Africanized European product to African immigrants living in Europe. Emphasizing this duality, Shonibare purchases the European-produced “African” fabric in Europe; more specifically, at London’s Brixton Market, which is located in a neighborhood identified with and populated by African immigrants.

There is no denying the importance of the Dutch Wax fabric to Shonibare’s practice. But what of the “bodies” it rests upon, and the spaces it has now, through Shonibare, come to be displayed in?

Shonibare has said that, “The main preoccupation within my art education was the construction of signs as outlined in Roland Barthes’s Mythologies. So the idea of the theatrical for me is actually about art as the construction of a fiction, art as the biggest lie.” Art is not the only signifier being undermined; as critics like Jean Fisher have noted, “Indeed, the inauthenticity of circulating signs of

---

5 Downey, “Practice and Theory,” no page numbers.
cultural identity is the message that most clearly emerges in the multiple layering and displacement of visual cultural codes that characterize his work." If the overall message of the work is a deconstruction of notions of art, authenticity and cultural stereotypes, as stated by the artist himself and the majority of scholars who have written about his work, the medium of sculpture plays an integral part in communicating these ideas.

Figure 0.4. Yinka Shonibare MBE. "Reverend on Ice," 2005.

Figure 0.5. Sir Henry Raeburn, *Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch*, circa. 1795.

---

6 Fisher, 27. Original emphasis.
Shonibare’s work, through the sculptural medium, confronts the viewer in real space and time with a unique and forceful articulation of the constructed, purely theatrical nature of the ways in which the West often views its past. Headless, human-scale simulacra of historic persons are transplanted into the present, bringing the viewer a step closer to touching the past. But unlike the waxworks representing historic figures that populate museums like Madame Tussaud’s, with Shonibare’s figures, we don't even remotely expect to touch living flesh; despite realistically rendered imprints of skin, the attempt at lifelike illusion is, on the whole, only half-hearted. Like the supposedly authentic history and culture they restage, Shonibare’s figures remain ultimately untouchable, locked in a past that can only become real through inauthentic reproductions.

A major question we must ask about Shonibare's reimaginings of key works in the painted canon in particular is why he chose to depict them in three dimensions and what potential meanings the choice of medium evokes. Yet this aspect of the work often seems to be taken for granted.

As mentioned above, the amount of written material on Shonibare’s work is sizeable. Because it largely appears as short, summary and thus, often repetitive blurbs or short interviews in newspapers and magazines, most of this writing offers only a gloss on his practice. More scholarly but still necessarily cursory writing has appeared in many surveys of contemporary art focused on such varied subjects as fashion, textiles, African art, British art, sculpture, and postcolonial art. Several catalogs published to coincide with Shonibare’s one-
man exhibitions offer more in-depth scholarship, though many only provide what amounts to an extended biography and overview of the fabrics, a description of the range and content of his expansive oeuvre, and an interview to which Shonibare offers calculated responses that read like press releases – understandable, given the fatigue that such a constant deluge of almost-identical questions must engender.

The best examples of writing on Shonibare have looked to deeper historical allusions and wider networks of art production in an attempt to understand not just Shonibare and his work but the channels that have created both. As one would expect, these channels almost always relate to colonialism and postcolonialism. Homi Bhabha has offered some of the most potent definitions and explorations of the postcolonial; for him,

The postcolonial perspective suggests rather that in the presentation of cultures, Western and non-Western, we adopt the perspective of the ‘parallax’ . . . : the ‘apparent displacement, or difference in the apparent position, of an object, caused by actual change (or difference) of position of the point of observation’ (Oxford English Dictionary). As the globe revolves, its other side uncannily discloses a skull.\(^7\)

Shonibare has feet firmly planted on both “sides” of the globe (that of both post-colonized and post-colonizer), and the “skulls” he uncannily discloses often take the form of headless bodies.

One of the best examinations of Shonibare’s work in this regard is Robert Hobbs’s “Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation,” which appears in the catalog for Shonibare’s largest touring show to date, 2008’s *Yinka*.

---

\(^7\) Bhabha, 321
Shonibare MBE, organized by the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art and subsequently traveling to Brooklyn and Washington, D.C. Hobbs invokes the economic theories of George Bataille to situate Shonibare’s work within a reconfigured notion of imperialism. Specifically, he cites the journal and society Bataille oversaw, whose name Acéphale refers to headlessness, as indicated by the journal's cover image of a headless Vetruvian-style man. Fitted into the notion of another famous metaphor of body and head - that of Robert Hobbes' Leviathan, in which the body politic supports the head of state through its consent to govern - Hobbs connects these ideas and images to the headlessness of Shonibare's figures and their commentary on the "loss of head" (the loss, that is, of the ruling colonial head of state) which signifies the transition from colonialism to postcolonialism. The connection to Surrealism via Bataille seems rather obvious, yet very few writers have explored it. Hobbs also laments that few studies have considered what the figures might mean to traditional Nigerian people such as the Yoruba, the tribe from which Shonibare’s family is descended; Chapter Two touches on Hobb’s exploration of this connection in the context of the modern ethnographic museum.

---

8 Chapter One will examine another applicable aspect of Surrealism. In fact, there are many possible connections; for instance, the headlessness of Shonibare’s figures and the Max Ernst collage book La Femme 100 têtes, in which variously re-constructed and headless women populate Victorian interiors. Unfortunately, the length of this thesis does not allow further exploration of this particular connection, but my thanks to Françoise Forster-Hahn for pointing it out.

9 See also writing by Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, who offer important perspectives on Shonibare’s practice; both are prominent Nigerian writers and curators (and in the case of Oguibe, a prominent artist) in the international contemporary art scene. Articles by both cited in
Building on an interest in the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and its analysis in Alex Potts’s book *The Sculptural Imagination*, my first impulse for an in-depth study on Shonibare was to focus on the artist’s sculptural work in terms of its relation to the history of the sculptural genre, with an emphasis on the phenomenological effects this work produces. As the introduction to a collection of interviews with contemporary sculptors, including Shonibare, notes:

> In the mid-20th century Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology ushered in an era of installation art predicated on integral relationships between human subjects and aspects of their habitual world, which were reconfigured to make them strange enough to elicit the type of eidetic reduction (bracketing) that phenomenologists have deemed necessary for understanding.¹⁰

Shonibare’s sculptures seem to especially alter the relationship of viewers to works of art formerly rendered in two dimensions. How the sculptures works as sculpture (if it can be called sculpture at all) in a three-dimensional, real space populated by observing bodies is often taken for granted in the writing on his art. This most elementary aspect of the sculptural sub-genre of his production could offer a new route through which to ascertain how his work achieves both its conceptual goals as well as its enticing visual impact - and thus, its almost overwhelming popularity within today’s global contemporary art scene. Nancy Hynes has explained his popularity by supposing that, "His ability to suggest story and character without containing them gives his work an accessibility and popular appeal rare in contemporary art, one partly achieved through the way he

---

¹⁰ Hobbs, “Conversing about Contemporary Sculpture,” 9
manages to link narratives - albeit multiple narratives - to highly conceptual work.”¹¹ These suggested stories allow viewers, in Shonibare’s own words, to “complete the work of art.”¹² This sort of interaction and audience participation, then, is key to the works themselves, while also ensuring that the audience’s attention is engaged long enough for the messages contained within the works to become apparent. In other words, fantasy and identification, which the romantically attired and ambiguous period figures encourage, lead to contemplation.

Because so much of Shonibare’s sculpture explicitly references painted work, jolting famous paintings into three-dimensional misrepresentations and in the process both nullifying and exacerbating the differences between the two media, I began to consider the differences between the genres. The early-modern Paragone debates, which argued for the superiority of one over the other, came to mind. Shonibare’s works upend most of the tenets of the original debate, which centered on notions of originality, difficulty, universality, physical endurance, and intellectual demand. These informal debates, which began in the Renaissance and were revived in the 18th century, seem to have been won by painting, if one takes the continued saturation of the pre-modern canon with painting as any sort of indication. Was Shonibare’s transference of people from a “higher” genre - painting - to a “lower” one - sculpture - a comment on the

¹¹ Hynes, 396
¹² Downey, “Practice and Theory,” No page numbers.
reception of non-Western art in the West? About its relegation, like sculpture, to
the margins of survey courses and textbooks?

Despite the oft-quoted Ad Reinhardt quip about sculpture being merely
something one bumps into when backing up to get a better look at a painting,\textsuperscript{13} there is little debate about contemporary sculpture's equal footing with painting.
With contributions to sculpture in the twentieth century being as varied and
revolutionary as those in painting, and set against a general revision and
rethinking of the canon at large, sculpture has risen in stature to the degree that it
now seems besides the point to speak of the paragone (which literally means
“comparison”) as having any relevance to discussions of contemporary art. This
is especially true in light of the fact that so many of today's artists work across the
multiple and ever expanding media that now constitute fine art practice.

However, because Shonibare's works reference art from the time of the
paragone’s revival in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, might such distinctions not still apply? By
creating work so thoroughly unconcerned with holding to the tenets of the debate
on quality which defined the very work he quotes (for example, his subject matter
is not original, and his art is manufactured rather than crafted by his own hand),
and which may in turn be applied to his work by more conservative viewers, does
Shonibare further declare his intention to subvert traditional thought about issues
of quality, hierarchy and authenticity? Therefore, would a look at his work in
terms of the paragone add further dimension to just what exactly his tableaux

\textsuperscript{13} Lichtenstein, 198
mean - and what it means for them to be rendered as specifically three-dimensional objects?

Ultimately, however, the two approaches of phenomenology and the paragone will remain part of the genesis of this thesis rather than its central focus. The line of thought on the paragone obviously provoked interesting questions and offered a good exercise for working out some deeper meanings within Shonibare’s sculptural practice as such, but in the end, seemed too limited. As far as the phenomenological ramifications tied to Shonibare’s work, one must ask whether Shonibare’s work creates in the viewer a heightened sense of their own bodily presence, as with the sculpture of the Minimalists. Shonibare’s sculptures are undeniably theatrical – but not necessarily in the (essentially phenomenological) ways that Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood,” his polemic against Minimalism, posited.14 There are more than simply issues of subjectivity in Shonibare’s sculptures; it seems that they are too loaded with signifiers, and thus are too “impure” to be read as phenomenological in the ways that modern sculptures traditionally have. Therefore an analogy with a pure phenomenology seems slightly off.

Thinking about Shonibare’s work in terms of phenomenology – the study of perception as a primarily sensory as opposed to mental function – did, however, lead me to the concept of the uncanny. In short, the phenomenal effect of headless, three-dimensional and lifesize figures seemingly snatched out of a

---

14 Fried sees Minimalism as reducing modern art to a theatricality and literalism that threatens a conception of art as above both temporality and mere objecthood.
visually altered past is essentially an uncanny effect – we feel a sense of unease or confusion when confronted by these figures. Physical and mental perception combine to create this effect, which might almost be characterized as a hybrid of pure phenomenological and strictly Cartesian models. In addition to encapsulating a certain “feeling” of unease that the sculptures inspire, the uncanny, when couched within its deployment by Freud, surrealism, and postmodernism, also provides a theoretical link between the works’ inspiration, the subsequent choice to render them in three dimensions, and their reception. Understanding how Shonibare’s work functions in terms of the uncanny encourages a deeper appreciation for the work’s overall message and impact. This argument will be further elaborated in Chapter One.

Ultimately, the first chapter looks at Shonibare’s sculpted work in abstract terms and as isolated figures using theories of the uncanny and the postmodern, while also considering the historic division between genres in the museum. Here, shades of the paragone remain visible. Chapter One will also articulate how the works function in the theoretically abstracted space of the modernist-derived museological “solution” to problems of display: what has come to be known as the White Cube. Chapters Two and Three will consider more distantly historicized spaces of display, such as the period room and nineteenth-century-derived museum displays exemplified by London’s National Gallery, as well as the specifically revisionary (but still inherently exclusionary) context of the 21st century ethnographic museum. Therefore, an emphasis on the special
Shonibare’s work is rich in layers. This thesis, through a focus on how the works function in three-dimensions and in three-dimensional spaces, intends to dig deeper into aspects of his work which have either not been considered at all or have only been touched on. With an overall production that is so tightly intertwined around certain themes and expresses them rather clearly, I fully expect to arrive at a conclusion in line with the postcolonial readings offered by both the artist and his many commentators. Hybridity is perhaps the overarching focus of Shonibare’s practice. The goal is not to offer a contradictory reading, but one that helps to more fully express the varied tonalities constituting the theoretical voice that issues from Shonibare’s mesmerizing figures, while also offering, through them, a focused meditation on practices of display both historic and contemporary.
Chapter One:

Uncanny Figures of History

"To perceive the aura of an object we look at, means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return."

- Walter Benjamin\(^{15}\)

---

\(^{15}\) "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), *Illuminations*, 188. Quoted in Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 196.
In *Mr. & Mrs. Andrews (without their heads)* (1998), his first foray into what would become a mainstay practice of quoting from the History of Art, Shonibare positions three fiberglass figures around a wrought-iron bench (rendered in bronze). A (headless) female perches primly, hands folded in her lap, her elaborate gown spilling across the majority of the bench’s seat, suggesting the elaborate structuring materials hidden underneath in the way it rises on both sides despite the woman’s relaxed position. The gown’s cut is of the 18th century, and the Dutch-wax fabric of its skirts bears swirls that seem to mimic the stylized iron of the bench (while also recalling the aestheticized industrial materials in Walter Benjamin’s vision of the 19th century Parisian arcades – perhaps a nod to the stirrings of the industrial revolution seen during the 18th century). The similarly headless man perched at her side casually leans his left arm on the bench while propping his shotgun under the other arm, sporting the type of casual male ensemble that, in the mid-18th century, displaced the frivolous costume of the French Rococo with English practicality rendered through basic shapes and solid colors. However, while the cut of the pattern seems accurate, his jacket and breeches, like the dress of his companion, are ablaze with contrasting bursts of mustards, ceruleans and dusty rose, all conspicuously patterned with abstract and op-art designs. The family dog completes the triumvirate, gazing attentively up at its master; it is the only element of the tableau that seems timeless.

In their permanent location at the National Gallery of Canada, the figures are dramatically positioned on a slightly raised white platform, in front of a very tall, blank white wall. The lighting is dim, and the figures cast long shadows against their empty surrounds. The assumptions and questions one might pose upon seeing Shonibare’s rendering of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are many and varied. Why is a headless 18th century European couple wearing fabrics that seem both contemporary and ethnic? Are they not “sculptures” in themselves, but mannequins simply displaying the costumes? Or are they themselves spectators, observing the activity of the gallery in which they sit, doing what none
of the other works of art there do, and what they seem physically incapable of doing themselves due to their headless state: watching us looking at them?

![Figure 1.3. Thomas Gainsborough, Mr. & Mrs. Andrews, 1748-49. Oil on canvas. National Gallery, London.](image)

Even if the viewer is not familiar with the painting quoted here – Thomas Gainsborough’s 1749 double-portrait *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* – there is the sense that something specific is being referenced – and distorted. Even their pose – which emphasizes a sort of *posing* – gives a hint that perhaps these two are meant to be having their portrait made. Here, as in his other works that quote paintings, Shonibare is, in his words, “appropriating a degree of [the painting’s] power whilst at the same time offering up a critique of it.”\(^\text{17}\) That this tableau could stand for any 18th century conversation piece (which the headlessness

\(^{17}\) Downey, "Setting the Stage," 40
seems to allow for) does not diminish the idea of appropriating a generic sort of power that such images possess: they are often displayed in pomp, with ornate frames, in lushly restored country homes or period rooms, mirroring the wealth of the original commissioners/sitters. Even though the Andrews' portrait has been stripped of the factors which motivated the original commissioning of the work - these being the recording of their identifying features (their faces) and the extensive grounds they owned (nearly as synonymous with identity in mid-18th century Britain) - those familiar with the original nonetheless still recognize the work even without the aid of the revelatory, if slightly altered, title. Given his utter disdain for what he sarcastically deemed "face-painting" and his preference for the nuances of landscape, Gainsborough would perhaps have felt equally amused and distressed by Shonibare's reinterpretation of his work: while the dreaded "faces" are gone, the beloved landscape, which provided the only satisfaction Gainsborough took in creating his famous conversation pieces, has likewise been obliterated.

In Shonibare's rendering, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, without their heads, are not necessarily white, and not necessarily English (or European). Yet a familiarity with the original makes such disassociation difficult. Might the level of familiarity of a particular audience member with the original instigate a type of performance – that of a pointed separation between members of the audience ostensibly initiated into Western cultural practices, and those outside them?
The placement of figures containing so many historicized elements in the thoroughly modern white cube-type gallery amplifies the intensity and ambiguity of the anachronistic, referential and performative aspects of the piece. Moreover, the space ensures that this modified early modern piece of the canon remains canonical – the White Cube “vouches” for its inclusion in a new, modern/contemporary canon. As Brian O’Doherty elaborates in his definitive study *Inside the White Cube*, this type of space, much like the grand galleries art was shown in before the 20th century, reifies whatever uses its walls as a backdrop, whether those walls are covered with ornate brocade or seemingly disappear due to their white uniformity. The only context is that of being displayed, with its almost religious elevation from object to Art; from object to Icon. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews relax by and on their bench in front of a new backdrop: one that renders a degree of prestige and deference comparable to the bountiful field and grounds that framed their 18th century counterparts.

While knowing the original Gainsborough painting may not be entirely necessary to appreciate Shonibare’s re-creation, the recognition of the fact that the two headless figures refer to something is itself important. Contemporary art’s referencing of canonical images has a rich history. Modern artists have played with the idea of famous art images by manipulating the very reproductions that have helped cement the canon’s status. This type of recycling produces new pieces that rely on the original’s aura, that mysterious quality of uniqueness and
exclusivity that Marx and 20th century scholars such as Walter Benjamin hoped mechanical reproduction would destroy.\textsuperscript{18}

Figure 1.4. Marcel Duchamp, \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.} 1919. Post card reproduction with added moustache, goatee and title in pencil.

The most famous, and perhaps one of the first works to encroach on the aura of the canon in a satirical way is Duchamp's 1919 altered postcard of the Mona Lisa, \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.} The statement works because the image is sacred, and Duchamp has defiled it with a mustache and a naughty pun. The significant thing is not that the image itself isn't the real Mona Lisa; the idea of it is what has been assaulted. Yet the original's aura (not to mention the value that then became attached to the actual postcard Duchamp altered) somehow remains intact despite the attack; indeed, the aura of the original work of Art is essential for the joke.

Shonibare is certainly working in the tradition of Duchamp, yet his work shows a more ambivalent, post-modern attitude towards the aura of the original;

the famous works his sculptures quote seem to be genuinely fetishized at the same moment that the era which produced them is criticized (along with, tangentially, the way the contemporary era continues to value such images). He has declared that, “I am not that kind of polemical intellectual, I am an aesthete, an artist. Poetics are very much at the centre of my work. The beauty of the work is just as important as the content.”

Shonibare is eager to acknowledge the unironical pleasure his images offer on a purely hedonistic, surface level – western societies collect and revere these portraits of the wealthy historic figures because, in a cyclical way, society has made their lives and lifestyles, which invariably included massive accumulations of valuables (like dresses, land, and art), the stuff of our dreams, and an undeniable part of Western identities. Shonibare has described his “job” as an artist as being “to take people elsewhere. My job is to create a wonderland or fantasyland for them. . . . The enchantment aspect is absolutely central.”

Is his earlier statement about “appropriating a degree of [the painting’s] power whilst at the same time offering up a critique of it” compatible with such a job description? Can critique exist within fantasy?

Indeed, the two are central in Shonibare’s work, and the sculptures which restage early modern portraits like Mr. & Mrs. Andrews demonstrate especially powerful ways of depicting both the fantasy and danger of the trappings of

---

19 Muller, 12
material culture, emphasized by the staging of the works within places where the
most valued of such items are also displayed – the museum. As Jean Baudrillard
put it, “The environment of private objects and their possession – of which
collections are an extreme manifestation – is a dimension of our life that is both
essential and imaginary. As essential as dreams.” The early-modern portrait
has often made the “extreme” journey from private object to a piece of the
collective memory, or dream, via the institution of the museum and the
reproduction.

Perhaps it is the merging of fantasy with critique that makes Shonibare’s
quotations unique amongst the art that, beginning with Duchamp and particularly
since the 1980s, have used this mode. The catalog for Shonibare’s 2001 show
*Be-Muse* notes that, “Much of the art of the past fifteen years has recycled the
postmodern practice of citation in the form of parody to attack the authority of the
Museum.” However, according to commentators like Okwui Enwezor,

Shonibare is doing this in a unique and innovative way: his work

Attempted to collapse two realms (high and low, design and art, the
quotidian and the unique, the colonial and post-colonial), breaking down
the usual binaries of the postmodern turn in culture (a culture which at that
point was burning out its tapers).

In order to fully understand what Shonibare is doing in these sculptural
recreations of famous portraits, and how they function in the White Cube, it is
important to understand the theoretical preoccupations of the art world from

---

23 Perrella, 18
24 Enwezor, Authentic/Ex-Centric, 214
which his own practice emerged; to understand why he has been called a “postmodernist, postappropriationist, postdeconstructionist, postcolonialist product.”

***

Fredric Jameson provided the most famous discussion of the then-new concept of postmodernism in his 1982 essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Culture.” Postmodernism is described as a multifaceted reaction against the stagnation and elitism of the Modernist art movement. Jameson writes that postmodern art incorporates “the effacement . . . of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture.” Furthermore, postmodern artists no longer merely quote; they “incorporate.” They not only refer to another piece of art; they rear-project their new vision onto the original, essentially merging their identity with its. The resulting combination involves a certain notion of in-betweeness and hybridity; subversion by way of the familiar made unfamiliar (new), the present as also past and vice-versa.

25 Sischy, no page numbers
26 Jameson, 112
27 Ibid.
28 I use the term “hybridity” in the sense of a quality in which several distinct or different elements are combined to create a “new” whole.
Ultimately, the postmodern functions in terms of time: whether the juxtapositions engendered are sourced from the present or come from distant realms of historic time, what makes the juxtaposition postmodern is the simultaneity in the new meaning the two disparate concepts combine to create. In other words, it is more of a collapsing than an expanding. Jameson describes this collapse, which he calls pastiche, as follows:

In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.  

However, artists working within the distinctly postmodern modes of appropriation of and reference to the past eventually turned what Jameson saw as an imprisonment in the past into a new model of innovation. The return of the sculptural figure and the increasing interest in incorporating direct (or even indirect, but no less pointed) quotations from the history of art are only two manifestations, both of which have a direct bearing on the work of Shonibare.

Preceded by the so-called Verist sculptors of the mid to late 1970s and 1980s, led by Duane Hanson and John De Andrea, the early 1990s saw the human figure return in earnest to sculptural art after its banishment by Minimalism. “What startles us in the work of De Andrea and Hanson,” Dennis Adrian writes in a catalog accompanying an early exhibition (1974) of the two

---

29 Jameson, 116
artists, “is not its closeness to nature but its departure from hitherto unchallenged dicta of modern taste.” It should also be noted that they depart not only from the abstract purity of a specifically twentieth century modern taste, but also from an early-modern taste that privileged naturalism – but within certain bounds.

Figure 1.5. Duane Hanson, *House Painter I*, 1984/1988. Epoxy resin, coloured with oil, mixed technique, accessories. Collection Hanson, Davie, Florida. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2010

30 Adrian, 1
While Hanson thoroughly subverted classical ideals by presenting clothed people who were explicitly vernacular, De Andrea provided a modern update on the classical nude – one so thoroughly “nude” that it too offered a type of subversion.

By the 1990s, however, unlike in the photo-realist figures of the Verists, the human figure in sculpture often remained at once extremely naturalized while also explicitly de-humanized. Charles Ray’s sculptural experiments with mannequins were some of the most noteworthy iterations of this trend, with both

Figure 1.6. Charles Ray, *Male Mannequin*, 1990.
the subject matter (such as a male mannequin equipped with "real" genitals) and
the use of the mannequin recalling certain tactics of Surrealism.\footnote{31 Jeffrey Deitch
observed that,}

\begin{quote}
From Ray’s own point of view, the mannequins are just as much abstract
as figurative . . . . They are also philosophical works dealing with issues of
authenticity and representation. But many of Ray’s abstract works also
have a figurative structure or function with the intervention of a human
presence. He is one of the artists to have pushed the furthest the fusion of
the confusion between abstraction and representation. Along with a
number of other artists of his and a younger generation, such as Kiki
Smith and Janine Antoni, he has developed a new form, the Conceptual
figure.\footnote{32}
\end{quote}

This conflation of bodily presence and conceptual meaning becomes literally
towering in his 1991 piece, \textit{Fall ’91}: a giant (8’ tall) female mannequin looms over
the viewer, depicting both the power of women, the power of fashion, and
perhaps most of all the enormity of the very system of late capitalism. Like the
work of Shonibare later in the decade, Ray’s mannequin sculptures were “a
contemporary study of the confusion of fantasy and reality; abstraction and
representation; genuine and fake.”\footnote{33}

Cindy Sherman, while not a sculptor in the manner of Ray, utilized the
mannequin to shocking effect in her 1992 photographic series "Sex Pictures,"
which invite comparisons to the similarly documented and similarly sadistic

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] The long hallway that preceded the galleries for the first International Surrealist Exhibition in
1937, for instance, was lined with mannequins; each artist participating in the show was given
one to altar as they saw fit, and the resulting hallway became known as "Mannequin Street." For
a more in-depth look at the Surrealist use of the mannequin, see Kachur, \textit{Displaying the
Marvelous} (cited in Bibliography), and Foster, \textit{Compulsive Beauty}. Foster’s analysis will be
touched on further in this chapter.
\item[32] Deitch, 24
\item[33] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
*poupée* created by the Surrealist Hans Bellmer. Works from Sherman’s series were included in Jeffrey Deitch’s groundbreaking exhibit "Post Human," which opened in 1992 and explored the dystopian alteration of the body by contemporary culture.

The figurative sculptural revival coincided with a concurrent revival of reference to the concept of the uncanny. As Mike Kelley writes in the 1992 essay accompanying a show he curated for *Sonsbeek ‘93* entitled “The Uncanny,” the new figurative sculptors of the 1980s and 1990s embraced an “outmoded technique” in order to be “willfully perverse.” He goes on to explain that, “What was to the modernists a despicable world of conventional, academic imagery became an open field of taboos and dead signs that could be rearranged at will.” Kelley connects this type of art (essentially, the postmodern) to Freud, explaining how

This current tendency of artworks to use as their subject the conventional and the cliché returns us to Freud’s conception of the uncanny. Earlier definitions of the uncanny had described it as a fear caused by intellectual uncertainty - precisely what the decontextualizing strategies . . . are meant to produce (one of the prime examples given being the confusion as to whether something is alive or dead).

Sculpture proved a medium especially well-suited to this tendency, with its ability to approximate in three-dimensions that which very well may be, or may have been, or could at some point be, alive.

---

34 Kelley, 91
35 Ibid., 91-92
36 Ibid., 94
Another strain of postmodern art with links to the uncanny was the historical (and specifically art-historical) quotation. Photographers of the late 1980s and early 1990s were especially drawn to these sorts of appropriations, in which something familiar (canonical works of art) is made unfamiliar to serve various purposes. Yasumasa Morimura’s insertion of himself into several canonical Edouard Manet paintings (Olympia and The Bar at the Folies-Bergeres) is perhaps the most well-known example. Norman Bryson offers three potential readings of Morimura’s project; first, as cultural criticism: Morimura is "prising open a space between [...] obsolescent, dying binaries, a space of hybridities and disjunctions." Second, he is concerned with the proliferation of, and the immersion of the world in, images that were "decontextualized" and "detached from whatever place they had originally been made," leading to “an experience in which fixed identity is a concept about as obsolete and archaic as

---

37 Bryson, Morimura, 74. Original emphasis.
38 Ibid., 76
the organic national culture or the free-standing nation-state.” Finally, Bryson sees Morimura as depicting a new global economy: “The viewpoint may actually be that of a later era of global capital looking back on an earlier one, and not from any moral ground above or outside the system. . . . What Morimura is miming isn’t only Western art, or Western bodies, but capital itself,” which “is always seeking a human face. We know why: it lacks a face.” Or, as we shall see, possibly a head.

Figure 1.9. Hiroshi Sugimoto, The Music Lesson, 1999.

---

39 Ibid., 77
40 Ibid. Original emphases.
41 Ibid., 79
Another photographer working in this mode of historical and art historical reference is Hiroshi Sugimoto. Like Sherman in her “Sex Portraits” series, Sugimoto’s work bridges the gap between the photographic and the sculptural by photographing wax dummies made to resemble historic figures and works of art. Descriptions of his project find many parallels in the work of Shonibare, as well as that of Moriumura:

Simulacral in the extreme, it announces its postmodernity in its many layers of mediation and its multi-media frame of reference, its embrace of illusionistic representation at a second and third remove, its resistance to a linear model of time, its recycling of the canon, and its refusal of the modernist postulate of originality . . .

Sherman herself perhaps paved the way for this new brand of imagery with her "History Portraits" series of 1988-1990. Unlike Morimura and Sugimoto (and Shonibare), Sherman did not reference particular pieces of canonical art; her series seemed to offer parodies of the types of composites a neophyte might see all such images corresponding to: generic ideas of what early-modern and nineteenth century art looks like.

While the deployment of quotations from art history and history remained popular in photography, their use in standalone sculpture was more rare. Bryson, who wrote on Sugimoto as well as Morimura, nicely characterizes the difference between the two, as made especially poignant by work like Sugimoto’s:

In the gallery waxworks can often be disappointing: they never quite achieve the condition of suspended time to which they aspire. Since they so evidently reside in the present time of the viewer who walks among them, the drive toward timelessness is constantly frustrated by the

---

42 Armstrong, 47
viewer's awareness of 'real time' conditions. In Sugimoto's photographs of the waxworks, on the other hand, the wax figure much more closely approximates a kind of timeless or suspended state, as a (photographic) instant that is indefinitely prolonged.43

Despite their timeless quality, however, Sugimoto's photos still function like a painting, offering an Albertian window into another world rather than a direct experience of one. It is precisely the conflation of suspended time and experienced present that the three-dimensional waxworks (and by extension, sculptures like Shonibare's) achieve that, unlike photography, render them as the most effective sites in which to deploy the uncanny.

* * *

Nods to the uncanny, nourished by the tenets of postmodernism, were obviously in the air in the 1980s and 1990s and could not have escaped the attention of younger artists like Yinka Shonibare. Whether consciously or not, the presence of the uncanny in Shonibare's work acts as a sort of synthesizer of the postmodern and postcolonial.

43 Bryson, Sugimoto, 63-64
As previously mentioned, Shonibare’s reconstructed period clothing from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (the high point of colonialism) has been the most well-known and visually seductive deployment of his ambiguously “African” Dutch wax fabrics. The costumes are not merely displayed; the headless mannequins that wear them take part in staged tableaux, some of which, like *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews (without their heads)*, derive from canonical paintings of the era. Shonibare also tackles Fragonard’s 1767 Rococo portrait
The Swing (made into Shonibare’s The Swing (After Fragonard); 2001). As with the Gainsborough, Fragonard’s original background is discarded, and the main figure from the painting “swings” from a fake tree limb attached to the gallery ceiling, in a seeming void of time and place; Shonibare “leaves it to the contemporary viewer to physically fill in the blanks in his representation and symbolically participate in [the] hedonistic revel[ ].” Unlike with Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, where even the dog has made it to the twenty-first century, not all the original actors from The Swing are present in The Swing (After Fragonard). The bishop who pushes the swing, along with the crouching lover in the foreground, have been left out. Shonibare seems to assume these gaps will be registered; he has stated that, “Although I cannot recall my first actual encounter with Fragonard, it seems to have been there forever, it was an iconic art historical image.” Like all of Shonibare’s figures, the swinging flirt is clothed in lavish layers of Dutch wax fabric which mimic the style of the Rococo and equate its love of fashion and excess with today’s luxury brands through the fabric’s incorporation of the double-C Chanel logo.

---

44 Verdier, no page numbers
45 Downey, “Setting the Stage,” 40
As Nancy Hynes wrote of Shonibare’s Swing in the anthology *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, the work has a particular relation to modern art that revived the human figure: “Shonibare’s tableaux seem a ghostly inversion of George Segal’s work; what is most important is not the body alone, but what the body comes wrapped in.” Still, this is not necessarily a *sculptural* imperative. The disjunctions between the "correct" period fabrics and the ones Shonibare uses in their place ("African" and very obviously contemporary fabric) along with the works’ other departures from the original work of art form the core of Shonibare's intended destabilization of notions of authenticity, race, class and

---

46 Hynes, 397. Segal’s most well-known figurative sculptures are rendered from plaster bandages left a uniform white color.
nationality. These works could just as easily have been rendered as paintings in which the Dutch wax patterns replaced the original costumes or, as in the work of Sherman and Morimura, photographed in the manner of the originals with the artist acting the parts.

Figure 1.12. Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy, 19:00 hours*, 1998
Shonibare's photographic work does in fact utilize this tactic; however, his presence in the photos seems to negate the need for the Dutch wax fabrics. He plays the part of Africa in these theatrical dramas. In his restaging of scenes from Wilde's *Dorian Grey* (2001) and his riff on Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* (which Shonibare re-casts a century later as *The Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998)), the period costumes are left "authentic," without a scrap of Dutch wax in sight. Race is obviously important in these photographs: Shonibare plays the hero, reversing early-modern European paintings’ typical relegation of African and other non-European people to representations as servants or marginal figures of comic relief. How then, does race figure into his sculpted work? It functions in an opposite manner; in terms of physiognomy and other physical “markers” of ethnicity, it is diminished, but in terms of cultural signifiers, it is heightened. Shonibare has explained the lack of heads on his sculptures as a means of negating race, which is also the aim of the “neutral” skin tone of the figures (though they certainly exclude darker shades of “black” skin from their potential racial “identities”).

---

47 A popular subtopic amongst Shonibare commentators has been his play on the idea of the dandy and notions of class; the best of these articles include those by Benedetta Bini, Mark Cheetham, Jean Fisher and Courtney Martin, all of whom are cited in the Bibliography. The dandy is most prominently featured in Shonibare’s photography, and therefore will not form a central tenet of the present study.

48 See, for instance, Hogarth’s “The Toilette” from his popular satirical series “Marriage a la Mode” (1743); a black servant offers a beverage to an oblivious woman in a room which includes mostly white men and one other white woman. A dwarf of perhaps Indian descent is seen in the foreground, looking out at us and gesturing to an antlered creature in his other hand; he seems to be pointing out the ridiculousness of the Europeans to the audience. Despite their placement in these typical “subservient” roles, Hogarth seems to be indicating that these two typically marginalized figures are actually the most respectable in the room. Thus, Shonibare’s use of Hogarth as a model for this photographic series makes perfect sense.
Besides this (somewhat dubious) negation of race, the advantages of using three dimensions and headless mannequins are not difficult to ascertain. Foremost, they allow the fabrics (in the guise of the costumes they compose) to be displayed as art objects themselves. The fabric’s tactility lends a heightened impact to its theoretical deployment as a signifier of race, authenticity and cultural exchange; this status as object-signifier would be reduced or even negated altogether in the two-dimensional space of a photograph or painting.

The mannequins, which may seem to function almost as frames for the fabrics, are specially produced for Shonibare and cast in fiberglass resin using plaster molds made from clay models. Yet they are more than just supports for the fabrics, despite the latter’s responsibility for providing the works’ initial visual impact; the figures themselves as devices of display hold a host of potential meanings. Foremost, they recall the museum’s mode of exhibiting period costumes in the fine-art context, where these historic clothes are to be admired as luxurious objects of wonder and beauty, often with no allusion to the conditions of their production or to what was worn by those of a lower social order. In fact, Shonibare’s first foray into using the Dutch wax to create

49 Wyndham, no page numbers
50 Because lower class people tended to wear hand-me-downs of past styles, as well as their own sewn creations, until they disintegrated, very few examples of these lower-order garments exist today. Nonetheless, few exhibits of period fashion even provide supplementary materials demonstrating less exclusive fashion. On the dress of lower classes, see John Styles, The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007; as well as Chrisman-Campell, 18.
garments – all of which are explicitly aristocratic - was inspired by a trip to the costume department of London’s Victoria and Albert Museum.\textsuperscript{51}

Moreover, there are longstanding divisions within the museum between the departments responsible for costume and those responsible for “finer” arts such as sculpture and painting. The costume department has historically had little interaction with academia, whereas such interaction has been integral within departments of sculpture and painting. Only recently has fashion and costume display begun to be theorized.\textsuperscript{52} One gets the sense that Shonibare is purposefully placing his work in a category hovering between the “lower” part of the museum (decorative arts, costume, etc) and the “higher” parts (from which his quotation material – Western painting and sculpture – is drawn). This dichotomy within the display of Western artifacts mirrors the more general divide between artifacts from non-Western civilizations and those of the West, which are often housed not just in different departments, but in different museums altogether.\textsuperscript{53}

One factor in the relegation of costumes to the lower tiers of the museum hierarchy is certainly the commercial associations of fashion.\textsuperscript{54} Indeed, many presentations of fashion in the museum setting resemble a high-end retail

\textsuperscript{51} Wyndham, no page numbers
\textsuperscript{52} See, for instance, the special issue of Fashion Theory journal dedicated to exploring this turn: ed. Valerie Steele, vol 1 (12, 2008).
\textsuperscript{53} This particular issue will be further explored in Chapter 2.
window display. Shonibare’s work is vulnerable to the same associations, which was affirmed by London department store Harvey Nichols’ offer to hire Shonibare to create a window display for their store. When he declined due to time constraints, they created their own based on his "style." This is quite ironic when one considers that Shonibare’s fabric represents what would have otherwise been considered a very “low” and unfashionable style for Western consumers, particularly those of the high-end merchandise in which Harvey Nichols specializes. By its integration into the spaces of fine art, however, this low association becomes elevated. This was not lost on Shonibare, who said of the incident, "...the moment this fabric gets shown at the Turner Prize exhibition, at the Tate, suddenly it becomes chic. It's the way the so-called outsider stuff - 'peasant' clothes, for example, suddenly becomes chic..."55 Anthony Downey adds that this confusion between markets, “creates a sort of fluidity and a certain ambiguity. You are not quite sure what the difference is – if indeed there is one..."56 While the context is obviously different, the allusions to commerce nonetheless remain.

It is this aspect of the work – its relation to la mode and the capitalist-devised system that supports such cycles of exchange and obsolescence - that an exploration of the uncanny can help flesh out, particularly in the way that Hal Foster has used it to analyze the Surrealist movement in his book Compulsive Beauty. I would like to emphasize that I am not advancing a psychoanalytic

55 Downey, “Practice and Theory: Yinka Shonibare,” no page numbers
56 Ibid.
reading of Shonibare's work, nor am I explicitly describing it as Surrealist in style; as will be demonstrated, the uncanny itself seems to reside in Shonibare's work on many levels, and Foster's analysis, along with several other texts, prove exemplary of how many of the same principles the uncanny unearths in Surrealism can also be very productively applied to Shonibare.

Conveniently enough for a consideration of Shonibare's relation to the uncanny, literary critic Terry Castle has made the claim that the eighteenth century “invented” the uncanny. According to her book The Female Thermometer, Castle views the notion of the uncanny as a particularly early-modern phenomena and claims that it can reconcile 19th and 20th century views of the 18th century. Castle details the relatively recent changes in perception of the 18th century brought about by scholarship such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment as well as that of Michel Foucault (whom Shonibare specifically cites as influential\(^\text{57}\)); because of their work, one can no longer view this era as one of unproblematized progress and increasing reason, as the majority of history writers of the 19th and early 20th centuries did. Rather, Castle asks,

> What allows the repressed fantasy [of the eighteenth century] to come again into view? Metaphorically speaking, we notice, the Freudian uncanny is a function of enlightenment: it is that which confronts us, paradoxically, after a certain light has been cast.\(^\text{58}\)

\(^{57}\)“At Goldsmiths, known for its emphasis on conceptual work and theory, he read Foucault and Derrida. This, he insists, was very important for his work.” Nancy Hynes, “Redressing History – Yinka Shonibare,” in African Arts (Autumnn) 2001. Accessed online at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0438/is_3_34/ai_81564751/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0438/is_3_34/ai_81564751/) (04/02/2011).

\(^{58}\)Castle, 7. Original emphases.
Shonibare’s figures play with a fantasy of the 18th century (maintained by things such as romantic literary adaptations and museum exhibitions of period dress), but both the figures’ lack of heads and the tainting of the period costumes with contemporary African fabric hint at sinister undertones. Castle proposes that one might argue, “extrapolating from Freud, that the uncanny itself first ‘comes to light’ - becomes a part of human experience - in that period known as the Enlightenment . . . and that this history has everything to do with that curious ambivalence with which we now regard the eighteenth century.”59 In other words, the eighteenth century created the very conditions for its future romanticization – a romanticization essential to Shonibare’s work.

This romanticization and its intrinsic consequences, such as the casting of those not of European descent as “Other,” are what connect Shonibare to the uncanny. Freud described the uncanny as originating only when man reached a specific developmental stage, related to how one views the phenomena of repetition and “doubling.”60

When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the ‘double’ being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted - a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The ‘double’ has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons.61

59 Ibid.
60 “Doubling” in the Freudian sense was first written about by Otto Rank (1884-1939); it is related to the formation of the super-ego; “in primitive animism it is a narcissistic extension of the ego and a guarantor of immortality” (Wikipedia entry on “Doubling”). When narcissism withdraws, death becomes imminent. The soul is often seen as a sort of “double” to the body.
61 Freud, 212
Not only does this excerpt emphasize the disquieting nature of the uncanny, but it also posits the uncanny’s genesis as necessitating an advancement from childhood (“a very early mental stage” – consider how so-called primitive cultures were often described as child-like) to a stage in which such irrationality is “surmounted.” Could we not also substitute concepts from postcolonial theory such as mimicry or Othering for Freud’s notion of “doubling?” Or even the move from the colonial to the post-colonial?

It should now be clear that the origin of the uncanny can be readily tied to the very period in which colonialism thrived, as well as to the colonialist notions this period engendered. The fact that this is also the period in which industrial capitalism began its ascent has further ramifications for considering Shonibare’s work.

The stirrings of capitalism – and their relation to subsequent colonial enterprises by European nations – reside in Shonibare’s work on many levels. Here I bring Foster in; he seemingly concurs with Castle’s placement of the “birth” of the uncanny in the 18th century, and his arguments add further depth to Shonibare’s referencing of this time period. In Compulsive Beauty, Foster mentions that many of the Surrealist’s bases for figuring the uncanny in object form originated in antique automatons from the 18th century, such as the famous “Young Writer” by Pierre Jacquet-Droz (1770). The "Young Writer," along with the other surviving automata from that era, represented the beginning of the change from an agrarian to a capitalist economy in which people became more
and more akin to machines in the labor system and machines, such as these automata, began to take the shape of people. This confusion between animate and inanimate forms the basis of one definition of the uncanny.

By the time of their delectation by the Surrealists, these objects had become emblematic of capitalism in a new way: they now represented the outmoded, that which no longer served any particular use and had gone from commodity to worthless curiosity and back again (in the form of “antiques”), though it was that which fell into the category of “worthless” which held the keenest interest for the Surrealists. For Shonibare, it is items from the past with high values, such as rare costumes and rarer paintings, that offer inspiration; they are outmoded in certain ways and removed from their original contexts, but are also highly valued in cultural terms – in fact, the paintings often represent the highest type of cultural and monetary capital. This reflects Shonibare’s distinctly ambiguous relationship to capitalism. He has stated in several interviews that luxury has an allure for him, and he wants his work to reflect that. Nonetheless, there is an inherent critique of capitalism in his work that surfaces at the most basic level due to Shonibare’s immersion in postcolonial dialogue, which necessarily critiques the exploitation that generated so much of the early modern wealth, as well as the art, that Shonibare’s works restage.

Moreover, Foster reasons that, "if surrealism repeats images of the nineteenth century, it is to work through them as ciphers of repressed moments."

---

62 Thanks to Susan Laxton for emphasizing this point.
. . so that the twentieth century can be awoken from the dream of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{63} Shonibare repeats images of the eighteenth as well as the nineteenth centuries, and indeed treats them as "ciphers of repressed moments:" the dark moments of colonialism. Relating back to Castle's use of the uncanny as a way to coalesce the 19th and the 20th centuries' view of the 18th, we can also view Shonibare's work as making a similar revisionary effort. Indeed, each of his sculptures relating to this era show the “enlightenment” as falling on, as well as emitting from, bodies without eyes – or heads. This is explicit not only in the idle aristocrats such as the woman in \textit{The Swing}, but also in people who we might think knew better. Shonibare’s recent series “The Age of Reason” (2008) features Dutch wax- clad mannequin/sculptures of “enlightened” thinkers such as Adam Smith, Kant and Lavoisier who, in addition to being rendered as headless (naturally), are also given an additional physical disability; Kant, for example, has lost his legs as well as his head. The form has further connotations: these figures are the antitheses of the noble white portrait busts typically used to commemorate such “worthies.” There couldn’t be a more obvious critique of the supposed intellectual sophistication of the minds of this era than the complete reversal of how they have traditionally been honored.

The Enlightenment informs Shonibare’s work in another way. A key aspect of what made items such as the antique automata so in-line with both the Surrealist project and the notion of uncanniness is related to an inherent criticism

\textsuperscript{63} Foster, \textit{Compulsive Beauty}, 170
of the capitalist system of the commodity: these figures are both outmoded technologically and rendered by hand, qualities Surrealists prized in their *objets trouvés*. Shonibare's sculptures achieve this combination as well, which is further explained by Foster as follows:

Provisionally we can see this difference as that between the aura of the crafted object in which human labor and desire are still inscribed, and the fascination of the fetishistic machine or commodity in which such production is either incorporated or effaced.\(^{64}\)

Shonibare explicitly hijacks both the aura of the handmade (the costumes as well as the original works of art when he uses them as a basis for his tableaux) on which "human labor and desire are still inscribed" as well as the fascination these types of objects elicit – items that are essentially unattainable to all but the most wealthy of modern consumers who, today, are usually institutions rather than private individuals. Interestingly, modern clothing doesn't need to be inscribed with human labor to emit aura; many of the most coveted brand name “couture” houses (such as Chanel, whose logo appeared on the skirts of *The Swing (After Fragonard)*’s protagonist) manufacture the majority of their products.

Fascination functions complexly in another way; it is deleted from the sculpture itself, which was, until only about fifty years ago, prized above all for its skillful handicraftsmanship. It could be argued that the mannequin is idealized in the same way as the female nude archetypes of sculpture, particularly the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century sculptures by artists such as Gérôme or Canova. It was even common for many mannequins of the early twentieth

\(^{64}\) Ibid., 127
century to be highly individualized and extremely artfully crafted, as Nicole Parrot’s survey on the modern mannequin demonstrates. But the tie to commercialism and consumption unequivocally separate these “low” and “vernacular” items from the occupants of sculpture halls and gardens that exist solely for visual delight (though of course these more vaunted forms have commercial values of their own). Shonibare’s works can be characterized as sculpturally illustrative of the mechanical-commodified and the outdated: they are sculptures rendered by machine rather than by hand. Are chiseled marble sculptures, or any other type that reflects hand-modeling, now as outmoded as the hand-made period costumes Shonibare’s manufactured sculptures display? The modern approximation of chiseled marble – cast fiberglass – finds its use value not through a specifically use-less and aestheticized physical beauty but through its standardization and ability to display luxury commodities – they are the usurping aesthetic objects of desire in the mannequin’s version of sculpture.

Foster's chapter "Exquisite Corpses" offers a closer look in particular at the modern mannequin, and provides further means for exploring how Shonibare’s work uses this particularly uncanny cipher to critique the capitalist system out of which colonialism and consumerism arose. Discussing the mannequin specifically, Foster characterizes it as a crossing of the human and the nonhuman; mannequins figured... uncanny changes wrought upon bodies and objects in the high capitalist epoch. On the one hand, the mannequin evokes the remaking of

---

the body (especially the female body) as commodity, just as the automaton, its complement in the surrealist image repertoire, evokes the reconfiguring of the body (especially the male body) as machine.66

This observation also offers a very good theory as to why Shonibare chose to work in sculpture for pieces like *The Swing (After Fragonard)* and *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews (Without Their Heads)*, and why that “sculpture” takes the form of a clothed mannequin. Shonibare is essentially effecting the changes wrought by capitalism onto the body of traditional figurative sculpture. Even more than the European body, these changes especially affected notions of the distant colonial subject’s body. It existed not as the seat of an individual, but as a cog in the wheel of progress and financial domination.

While Shonibare’s use of the mannequin is united with the work of the so-called “mannequin artists” of the late 1980s and early-mid 1990s under the general aegis of postmodernism, it is his work’s explicit connection to the capitalist past and present that sets it on a unique trajectory. In the words of Foster,

> So, too, the deployment of outmoded images may challenge the capitalist object with images either repressed in its past or outside its purview, as when an old or exotic object, redolent of a different productive mode, social formation, and structure of feeling, is recalled, as it were, in protest.67

The protest here is to a faith in the products of capitalism (art, colonialism) as liquidators of historic truth, or to any signifier – whether old, like the quoted sartorial style or the early modern paintings, or exotic, like the Dutch wax, as

---

66 Foster, 126
67 Ibid., 127
authentic. An observation Norman Bryson has written regarding the work of the aforementioned photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto can also explain the way Shonibare constructs his protest:

There is also a different sense of time, of a historical crisis in which the body of the pre-modern is stripped of its dignities one by one, to emerge as the frail and comparatively abject subject of the modern world. The waxwork crystallizes antithetical elements which coexist in the same object, yet possess very different rhythms: the measured and dignified narrative that is told about history, with its dynastic evenness and ‘long duration’; and the abrupt, discontinuous, and violent process that is history.  

The “stripping of the [early] modern body” is as effective when its target is a headless mannequin made of fiberglass, as opposed to a realistic waxwork rendering; here, the antithetical elements become multiple: past and present, pre- and post- capitalist, high and low, colonizer and colonized. Through the uncanny associations his work elicits – whether to Surrealism, Freud or to the real/unreal binary in general – Shonibare makes clear, in three dimensions, “the abrupt, discontinuous, and violent process that is history.”

But how do these uncanny figures function in different sorts of spaces? Shonibare’s work is supremely adaptable in terms of how its messages function within extremely varied settings. Each example discussed in this chapter – Mr and Mrs Andrews (Without Their Heads), The Swing (After Fragonard), and the figures from The Age of Reason - was displayed in modern gallery settings, where no context distracts from the abstract theories found in the figures themselves – none, that is, but that of Contemporary Art itself. Despite the  

Brys on, Sugimoto, 63
attempts of postmodernism to break with the hegemony of Modernism, most postmodern art retained the White Cube display – itself a Modernist invention. Of course, Shonibare’s art is as much in dialogue with contemporaneity and modernism as it is with the past, so in many senses, this type of display can seem quite dynamic.

However, Shonibare has also extended the postmodernity of his figures by creating pieces whose site-specific locations amplify the works’ evocations of both history and modernity in different ways. Chapters Two and Three will look at several of these more site-specific cases. Some of these spaces have an agenda focused, if only subliminally, on celebrating a national (and imperial) past, while others relate more specifically to the collecting of the Other within a former colonial power.
“That which is consigned to the past is rendered curiously unthreatening today.”

- Marian Paster Roces

During Yinka Shonibare’s formative years of advanced study in Britain, capped off by his time at Goldsmith’s from 1989-1991, the postmodern and its revival of the uncanny were by no means the only currents in scholarly theory that must have come to his attention. The other important “post” – postcolonialism – was also a hot topic. It often coincided with another growing realm of study revolving around the history of the museum. Theorists made clear that Britain’s intimate ties to both the growth of the modern museum and colonialism in the nineteenth century were not a coincidence.

Most studies of the modern museum place its birth within the eighteenth century, when aesthetics rose as a philosophical discourse and states consolidated princely collections in order to aid in the creation of national identities and to form citizens whose identities mirrored that of the nation. The French Revolution represented the most extreme case of this move from princely to public collections. By the mid-nineteenth century, national identity came to incorporate something more. In 1851 London’s Great Exhibition of the Arts and

---

69 Roces, 53
70 See “General Introduction: What Are Museums For?” in Preziosi and Farago, eds., pp. 5.
Manufactures of All Nations, better known by its architecturally derived nickname “The Crystal Palace,” opened its doors to the world and, as the first massive exposition marketed as explicitly international, exemplified “the exhibitionary complex,” a phenomenon described by Tony Bennett in a 1988 article of the same name. This new type of spectacle incorporating the national, the international, and the colonial engendered a model for thinking about and organizing the world. Unlike the biggest public spectacles of the eighteenth century that created nationalist pride by looking inward, such as the art shows organized by the Royal Academy or the entertainment available at pleasure gardens like Vauxhall, the new nineteenth century invention of the World Exposition expanded the view beyond Britain. The specular dominance inherent in the Exposition project afforded its purveyors “an elevated vantage point over a micro-world that claimed to be representative of a larger totality;” now, nationalist pride derived from the perceived ability to order this larger totality of the British Empire as both micro- and macro-world.

Timothy Mitchell expands Bennett’s notion in his article “Observing Subjects / Disciplining Practice” (1989), claiming that the exhibitionary complex derived from this elevated imperial vantage point was soon so deeply ingrained in the modern Western psyche that it became manifest outside the walls of the formal exposition: from the new iron and glass arcades to the department store to

71 One must also consider the exhibitionary complex as a result of newly expanding practices of tourism, aided by advances in transportation. Thanks to Françoise Forster-Hahn for pointing this out.
72 Bennett, 436
the founding of disciplines like anthropology, “the world itself [was] being ordered up as an endless exhibition.” Mitchell takes Paris rather than London as his main example, looking specifically at the reactions of Arab visitors to the 1889 Exposition Universelle. These visitors found the whole spectacle disorientating; they saw their civilization reflected back to them at the fair through the distorted mirrors of Orientalizing displays, while they saw the Parisian civilization outside as organized in a shockingly similar manner to the micro-world within the fair: “Everything was arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere ‘signifier of’ something else.” Mitchell identifies this “something else” as “a larger meaning such as History or Empire or Progress.” Both Bennet and Mitchell place the Eiffel Tower in an important symbolic role, not only as representative of the new tourism or of the new iron-clad ideals of modernity, but as a place from which one can view the city below, allowing “the individual to circulate between the object and subject positions of the dominating vision it affords over the city and its inhabitants.” This is what the world fairs as a whole allowed Western visitors to do; the tower itself signifies this new mode of viewing the world as a thing to be ordered in terms of Western systems of meaning. Prime among these systems of meaning was the museum, and especially its displays of the objects of “other” societies. The following chapter will reveal how one particular installation by Shonibare,

73 Mitchell, 443
74 Ibid., 447
75 Ibid.
76 Bennett, 436
erected in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, exemplifies the above principles in order to undermine them.

* * *

The Musée du Quai Branly, completed in 2006, was a pet project of then-president of France Jacques Chirac. It was ten years in the making and cost $300 billion. “Starchitect” Jean Nouvel designed the space, which, surrounded by gardens extending into the very façade of the building, sits at a prime location on the Seine, directly across from the Eiffel Tower. Presidential legacies in France have begun to converge with heritage formation/commemoration in the forms of new museums, and the Quai Branly is only the latest and costliest example; its precedents are George Pompidou’s Renzo Piano-designed Centre Pompidou.
(aka the Beaubourg), built in the late 1970s, and Francois Mitterand’s I.M. Pei-designed pyramid, installed at the Louvre in the late 1980s.

The museum is a result of both complex political forces and elements of Chirac’s own interests. The genesis of and reactions to the museum have been thoroughly explored by Sally Price in her book *Paris Primitive*, as well as in shorter but excellent articles by James Clifford and Dominic Thomas. Therefore, I will only go into a brief summation of the circumstances and controversy surrounding the museum here.

Chirac had a longtime fascination with the type of art that would constitute the permanent collection at the Branly: the art of non-Western peoples. Before the new museum’s completion, he successfully lobbied for a special display of these types of artifacts at the Louvre. But Chirac’s ultimate mission was to create a new and outstanding space dedicated to *other* cultures ["*cultures autres*"], rather than the integration of these other cultures into institutions also housing Western art. According to Chirac, such a space would reflect the call “for an attitude of ‘respect and recognition’ and a rejection of ‘ethnocentrism, that unacceptable, unreasonable pretense by the West to be the sole bearer of human destiny.’” It is not difficult to see the contradictions inherent in this call for respect; the project quickly ignited controversy.

---


78 “Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, à l’occasion de l’inauguration du Musée du quai Branly,” June 20, 2006, available on various government Web sites such as
Herman Lebovics proposes that a potentially sinister motivation behind the museum’s conception is the notion that such an institution would close the colonial era for France by means of aesthetic modernism. Showing beautiful creations of gifted artists, and showing them without history, without social context, and without evidence of the relations of power they embody – in a word, without the layers – has been now for over a century and a half the classic exhibition strategy for eliding human reality from which the art emerged and about which it speaks. It remains today the West’s oldest, and most honored way of occulting a terrible past.  

This quote sums up the huge amount of backlash the museum provoked. By not including the West, was it not reinforcing the separateness of the two? New York Times columnist Michael Kimmelman asks the important and slightly rhetorical question, “What links Vietnamese textiles with contemporary Aboriginal paintings with pre-Columbian pottery with Sioux warrior tunics with Huron wampum?” He then provides its grim answer: “Only the legacy of colonialism and the historical quirks of French museum collecting.”

If the concept raised serious doubts, its execution confirmed them for many critics. The permanent collection, which was pooled from the two main anthropological museums in Paris (the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, both of which were closed after the opening of the Branly), is displayed in a strange, dark, theatrical space surrounded by “jungle” and designed to evoke “magic” (in architect Nouvel’s

---

80 “A Heart of Darkness in the City of Light,” 07/06/2006.
Information on the artifacts is difficult to find, as most of it is located in touch-screen monitors often at a distance from the actual displays. There are no traditional wall labels. The museum states that its goal is to treat the objects as purely aesthetic masterpieces. While this approach may seem to represent a gesture of elevation and respect, it is coming from a completely Western notion of the aesthetic art object. Even more, it negates any discussion of how the piece ended up in the museum and displaces it into what has come to be known as “anthropological time:" a horizontal time void of history, in which all primitive objects were seemingly created. It is explicitly different from the vertical time observed in the West, which acknowledges and usually emphasizes different eras of history, assuming a sense of progress. But despite all the criticisms, the Quai Branly has been a popular success, especially with members of the public who emigrated from the areas represented in the museum.

While the permanent collection and interior design of the museum tend to reinforce both the separation of “primitive” cultures from the “high art" of the West as well as notions about its child-like nature, the museum does provide avenues for exploring the implications of colonialism and the wider histories of the objects on display. These are mainly found in the temporary and contemporary programs, which are housed separately from the permanent collection. The first

---

81 "Jean Nouvel's letter of intent for the 1999 international architecture competition is quoted prominently in the museum’s lavishly illustrated and detailed introductory materials, distributed at the opening ceremonies, June 20, 2006. All self-descriptive quotations, cited below, are taken from this document or from the Quai Branly Web site.” Quoted in Clifford, "Quai Branly in Process," pp. 4.

such show explored the outsider’s views of the West from an historic and anthropologic standpoint. The second featured a new installation by Yinka Shonibare created for the museum.

Figure 2.3. J.H. Fragonard, *The Pursuit*, from *The Pursuit of Love*, oil on canvas, 1771-1772. Frick Collection, New York.

Figure 2.4. J.H. Fragonard, *The Love Letters*, from *The Pursuit of Love*, oil on canvas, 1771-1772. Frick Collection, New York.

Figure 2.5. J.H. Fragonard, *The Lover Crowned*, from *The Pursuit of Love*, oil on canvas, 1771-1772. Frick Collection, New York.

Shonibare’s sculptures, a collective take on Fragonard’s eighteenth-century series of paintings known as *The Progress of Love*, were shown in the so-called Garden Gallery, which surely inspired his choice of subject matter. This gallery is located on the ground floor of the museum behind the entrance hall, below the permanent galleries, and abutting the museum’s garden.

Fragonard was famous for his ability to portray lush gardens as vital, living organisms that play more than a simple backdrop for the lovers’ trysts that take place within them; they are part of the seduction and epitomize the natural allure of the female. Like so many of Fragonard’s other paintings, nature is an integral part of the *Progress of Love*. It mirrors the interactions of the lovers: the lower
foreground is stuffed with an abundance of flowering bushes (with roses being the primary variety, naturally) and fruit trees; these anchor the more wild and upward-shooting trees in the background, which seem to almost sneak up on the foreground’s flora from behind before dissolving into a smoky mist at their apex in the paintings’ pale blue skies, into which gentle white clouds seem to have been expelled. As is typical of the Rococo style with which Fragonard is identified, antique elements such as statues and architectural fragments anchor the compositions in a nature that, despite its wild verdantness, has been, in a sense, tamed: it is designed and calculated to appear “natural.” The cycle was originally commissioned for the country house of Louis XV’s mistress, Madame du Barry, and therefore the depiction of amorous pursuits in the deep woods of the countryside was entirely appropriate for both the space and the patron. Ultimately, however, the series was rejected due to what some historians guess was a personality clash between the artist and the famous courtesan,84 while others explain that du Barry’s turn to the artist Joseph Marie Vien reflected the fact that his “conventional ancient-style paintings were more in line with the fashion of the day.”85

Shonibare recreates three of Fragonard’s four original scenes: *The Pursuit*, *The Lover Crowned* (which he renames *The Crowning*), and *The Love Letters* (renamed *The Confession*). As with his other quotation of Fragonard, *The Swing (After Fragonard)* (discussed in Chapter One), Shonibare’s sculptural take

---

84 Ashton, 142  
85 Viatte, 6
on *The Progress of Love* scenes eliminate the most emphatically “Fragonard” of the painting’s features, but in a slightly different way. *The Swing (After Fragonard)* removes virtually all context, including the supporting characters. The viewer sees only the lady (now headless), swinging from a fake limb, and as they approach, viewers take on the role of not only the original painting’s sculpture of cupid, who gawks at the scene, but of the lover on the receiving end of the woman’s upward swing, who gawks at the bawdy view this position affords. Depending on how *The Swing (After Fragonard)* is displayed, if visitors can circle
around the piece, they may also take on the role of the priest who pushes the swing, unawares of the presence of the woman’s lover hiding in the foreground.

![Image](image.png)


*The Garden of Love* is much less explicit in terms of how the viewer participates in it. Despite its name, the Garden Gallery is housed completely indoors, and Shonibare conceived the installation as a maze in which one “stumbles” upon the various lovers. The maze-like arrangement mirrors what many have described as the disorientating effect of Nouvel’s museum interior, in which the displays tend to have no logical flow and seem to have been coordinated in inexplicable ways. Yet when one does intrude on a set of lovers
(and word “set” is key here - the figure is no longer isolated and thus open to an exclusive interaction with the viewer), they become a voyeur of a more distant sort than in *The Swing (After Fragonard)*. The relationship has been reduced to that of audience and actors on a distant stage, one which discourages direct (or imagined) audience interaction.


Unlike both the gardens outside the Branly, which were designed to be an integral part of its exotic, wild atmosphere, and the wildly romantic gardens of Fragonard’s paintings, the gardens in Shonibare’s piece go beyond representing
cultivated and thus “tamed” versions of nature: they are explicitly fake. In his review of the exhibit, Ronald Jones goes so far as to describe his “foliage fakery” as taking “a page from Disney.” Likewise, his lovers are stiff and firmly anchored to the concrete gallery floor of their fake-moss covered mounds, frozen in their pursuits, unlike Fragonard’s figures, whose balletic movements make them appear lighter than air. The fact that Shonibare’s sculptures are headless is only a blunt exclamation point on their lifelessness.


---

86 Jones, no page numbers
Both artists are working with quotations and plays on convention. For Fragonard, that entailed playing with scenes derived from the “episodes” seen on stage in ballets and pantomimes: He “took a certain pleasure in using well-worn conventions that he then subverted in a subtle way.” The paintings also include statuary that are themselves multiple quotations: they were drawn from well-known paintings by Watteau and Boucher, but also represent allegorical commentary on the scenes taking place, such as when cupid reaches for the fruit held by Venus in a statue that appears in Fragonard’s version of The Love Letters.

For Shonibare, Fragonard himself, as a part of the Western canon, represents the “well-worn convention” that the postmodern, contemporary artist subverts; however, his are not nearly so subtle as the ways in which Fragonard played with the conventions of his day. Shonibare is here playing the part the West once did, and continues to do in places like the Quai Branly: he is re-ordering the world, and for him, this world is that of art. Everything becomes a signifier. The rich Rococo costumes now signify the colonial past in their material incorporation of Dutch wax fabric, as well as presenting the new status symbols of the modern world. This is particularly evident in The Confession, in which the woman’s skirts, like in The Swing (After Fragonard), bear the Chanel logo (as does the hat box top next to her, which ostensibly contained the love letters she

---

87 Ashton, 144
88 Ibid., 143
now reads), while her companion’s suit is covered with images of cars and houses – the material aspects of the modern dream of love and marriage.

The headlessness of the figures could signify the loss of one’s head when in love, but also the more sinister headlessness that many of the aristocrats Fragonard painted were destined to experience at the guillotine. Shonibare has explained the headless in both his Mr. and Mrs. Andrews and his Swing in this way, offering a warning against the glut of more modern well-to-dos.89 In an interview that appears in the exhibit’s catalog, Shonibare references the luxurious lifestyle of the French aristocracy before the Revolution, then declares that “I am deliberately taking this period as a metaphor for a contemporary situation.”90 As in his group The Age of Reason (discussed in Chapter One), the headlessness most certainly also signifies the loss of reason, indicating that the Europe that created the world as exhibition, with the ordering and othering entailed therein, was a mindless society, unwilling to look truthfully at the results of their self-serving vision.

Just as the Eiffel Tower signified the heights from which the Western viewer could attain a position from which to master the world below, Shonibare uses the vantage point of the contemporary, postmodern and postcolonial artist to enact a similar mission. The explicitly fake world The Garden of Love created

89 On the link between the French Revolution and his sculptures, see, for example, Downey, “Yinka Shonibare in Conversation.” “I first started to make headless people because I did not want to racialise my figures. I wanted them to be more complex figures; and at the same time there was a kind of joke about the French Revolution and the aristocracy with their heads being taken off” (no page numbers).
90 Muller, 12
in the Garden Gallery points out the constructed quality not only of the type of
nature and tableaux seen in Fragonard, but also of the whole apparatus of
display embedded in Western museums. The human actors in Fragonard
become, in Shonibare’s work, more like the garden statues that originally
commented on the lovers’ actions: not living and breathing, but merely symbols
and bearers of messages. Art plays an explicit part in the making of cultural
identities, and Shonibare plays with that notion. There is no clear cultural identity
displayed here; it has become hybrid. The processes that make an identity either
“Western” or “Other” are shown to be limiting, arbitrary and inauthentic.

In a sense, Shonibare is staging something similar to what the Quai Branly
has done – but in reverse. Like the African-American artist Fred Wilson,
Shonibare is mining the museum. Both find their material representing the
“Other” within Western society – for Wilson, it was the Maryland Historical
Society’s museum collection, which contained relics of slavery; for Shonibare, it
is Brixton market’s stalls of Dutch wax fabric. They then place this other material
in a Western fine art museum context. Wilson, for example, placed iron shackles
used on slaves amongst examples of more vaunted applied art metalwork, such
as silver tea kettles, in a typical museum vitrine. Shonibare has, on several
occasions, also created displays more akin to Wilson’s, in which he selects items
from a museum’s collection and places them amongst contemporary works,
usually his own. However, Shonibare’s use of this method is distinct from Wilson’s:

Shonibare had taken obvious pleasure in interacting, Fred Wilson-like, with an institution whose collection includes numerous items reflecting an era with very different attitudes towards exploration and the ‘exotic’ . . . though [Shonibare’s use of these items is] gentle in comparison to Wilson’s overtly political rearrangements.92

But the Quai Branly example of Shonibare’s brand of juxtaposition is perhaps more complex – it puts the “other” back into the imagery of the West, but then takes that hybrid back across town into the ethnographic museum – where the “other” has seemingly been quarantined. In the Musée du Quai Branly catalog, Shonibare, positioning himself as more African than European, compares himself to the Europeans who plundered African art: “I am actually acting in the very same way they were acting when they brought the objects back to Europe. I take [European paintings and clothing] as objects of curiosity in a similar way.”93 But what he is doing is more than just displaying European visual culture and fashion as a curiosity; ultimately, Shonibare re-inserts the West into a Western place from which it has been explicitly banished – and thus reverses the usual order of things several times over.

The appearance of the Garden of Love display emphasizes these reversals. The use of the medium of sculpture is itself suggestive. As noted by

91 See, for example, “Yinka Shonibare Selects” at the Cooper Hewitt Museum (2005-2006) and “Yinka Shonibare: Earth, Wind, Fire, Water” at the Israel Museum of Art (2010-2011).
93 Muller, 20
Elsbeth Court in her article on the display of African Art in the compendium *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, "Western interest in 'African art' has tended to focus on objects that best fit in with notions of 'fine art' (especially figural sculpture) and has neglected a huge array of other objects." Shonibare’s work continues the focus on the sculptural in “African” art, forcing a Western two-dimensional source into this perceived niche for African art. Yet it also incorporates items that, like fabric, have historically been excluded from notions of “fine art.” As Jones observes, “Like the ethnographic artifacts in the museum’s collection, the fabric was not intended as art in the Western sense either.”

Taken as a whole, the installations, with their essentially vernacular fabrics, fake ivy-covered latticing, three-dimensional theatrics and references to contemporary African fabrics would probably not be seen in a place like the Frick Collection, where Fragonard’s originals now reside. “France” and “Fragonard,” like the usually authorless “primitive” art of the other (often undifferentiated) countries on display at the ethnographic museum, are given the Quai Branly treatment – both are now part of a confusing maze of decontextualized relics from various times and places. Unlike much of the work in the Quai Branly, however, Shonibare’s work does display the layers affected by both cultural contact and history.

Furthermore, the placement of Shonibare’s work out of the context of the almost exclusively Western spaces in which it has been displayed invites alternative readings that focus on the specifically African allusions of his work.

---

94 Court, 150  
95 Jones, no page number
Robert Hobbs laments that these elements – in particular, studies of traditional Yoruba outlooks – have been passed over in the critical writing on Shonibare.\textsuperscript{96} After having seen traditional Yoruba art in the permanent collection (that is, if one can find the identifying labels that would mark it as such), perhaps the visitor to the \textit{Garden of Love} exhibit might look at Shonibare’s figures differently. Hobbs cites Nigerian art historian Babatunde Lawal’s description of the importance of the head in Yoruba art, where “‘it is almost always the biggest and most elaborately finished part of a typical figure sculpture,’” mirroring the belief that the head is the seat of the soul and thus the most important part of the body.\textsuperscript{97} In an obvious digression from this tradition, the headlessness of Shonibare’s figures takes on new meaning.

Even more importantly, at the Quai Branly, it is perhaps more likely that a Nigerian person familiar with these tropes would encounter Shonibare’s headless figures, and perceive them as “much more transgressive and alarming than would mainstream audiences.”\textsuperscript{98} If indeed Shonibare intends his work to be completed by the audience, in a space where the audience is often as hybrid as the work itself, there is a heightened potential for an even fuller range of reactions and interpretations.

\begin{center}
\textbf{***}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{96} Hobbs, “The Politics of Representation,” 34
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
In an article exploring the institutional nature of art and exhibitions through the lens of the Crystal Palace, Donald Preziosi considers how the past has come to be viewed, particularly through the vehicle of art. He claims that, since the eighteenth century, the “coimplicative” practices of “art” and “history” as institutionally constructed artifacts (which he emphasizes by placing them within quotation marks),

have functioned to render an object-domain called ‘the past’ synoptically visible so that it might operate in and upon (whilst at the same time distancing itself from) ‘the present’; so that this present might be seen as the demonstrable product of a specifically delineated past; and so that the past so staged might be framed and illuminated as an object of genealogical desire in its own right, configured as that from which a properly socialized and disciplined modern subject (the citizen of the nation-state) might learn to desire descent (or, conversely, might learn to abhor and learn how to reject).99

I quote at length not only because prose as complex as Preziosi’s requires it, but also because what he says here is so relevant to what I believe Shonibare is doing in his “art.” Shonibare produces work that explicitly points out the institutionally-constructed notions of art and history while operating within the traditional functions of both. It is both completely of the present, postmodern and postcolonial moment, yet also distances itself from the present through its uncanny evocations of the past. His work certainly renders “an object-domain called ‘the past’ [such as the costume style or the quoted historic art works] synoptically visible so that it might operate in and upon (whilst at the same time distancing itself from) ‘the present.’” However, with the contemporary Dutch wax

fabrics, Shonibare then closes this gap between past and present, eliminating the
distance and showing that certain relics of the past – such as the West’s
conception of primitive cultures – are not completely extinct. The past is still
desirable; beauty and fantasy are both emphasized. But the Garden of Love
stages that past in a unique manner that conflates the viewer’s desire of descent
(which might be invoked through a desire to experience a period drama first-
hand) with the desire to reject this past, as its colonial undertones have been
made obvious. The work speaks to all types of viewers, including those who
might be considered a “hybrid,” like Shonibare himself.

Shonibare makes plain that the past he shows is perhaps not so distant; it
may in fact still exert a demonstrable force in the present. This is made explicit by
his installation for the Quai Branly, and becomes even more important in
considering how his work deals with a specifically Western notion of the past.
Chapter Three:
Staged Histories

“The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning and the use of that place.”

- Rosalind Krauss\textsuperscript{100}

One hundred years after the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition, the first of many world fairs that waxed internationalism while, paradoxically, further cementing ideas of nationalism and heritage, Britain found itself facing deepening economic decline.\textsuperscript{101} The conservative idea of refuge in historic “Britishness” became popularized. This revival of nationalism was accomplished not through the ordering of the outside, international world via the lens of Western power, as the world fairs had done, but through a nostalgic look inwards, made manifest in the revived display of a world long gone - a world in which Britain was on the rise to world domination or at its apex. The owners of Britain’s massive country homes, which had been informal tourist attractions since the eighteenth century, could in many instances no longer afford their upkeep. Many were taken over by the National Trust and made into formal places of tourism, while other estates

\textsuperscript{100} “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” October 8 (1979): 33. Quoted in Buchloh, 277
\textsuperscript{101} See Cannadine, Ch. 24: “Nostalgia.”
auctioned off individual rooms to museums before the structures were demolished.102

By the early to mid 1980s, as Robert Hewison reports in his critique of this “Heritage Industry,” an estimated 48 million people visited country houses in Britain, only 5 million less than those who went to the cinema during the same period.103 Similarly, despite the ample representation of the period room in actual historic homes open to the public, museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum have kept their period rooms on display due to popular demand.104 Meanwhile, period dramas flourished on the BBC and Margaret Thatcher advocated a return to Victorian values, all leading Hewison to assert that,

I criticize the heritage industry not simply because so many of its products are fantasies of a world that never was . . . at a deeper level it involves the preservation, indeed reassertion, of social values that the democratic progress of the twentieth century seemed to be doing away with . . . .105

This revived display of and interest in an inherently imperial past is a crucial frame within which to examine the work of Shonibare. His work is unique in that it examines nostalgic notions of Britishness from both within and without the heritage industry. In fact, one of the most fascinating aspects of Shonibare’s historically-clad headless mannequins and re-created period spaces is that they exude both the danger and the allure of the past, the reality and fantasy behind

103 Cited in Riches, 45
104 For a detailed account of the renovation of the Victoria & Albert Museum’s period rooms, see Creating the British Galleries at the V&A: A Study in Museology, ed. Christopher Wilk and Nick Humphrey, 2004.
105 Hewison, 10
its creation. Chapter Two discussed these issues through the example of Shonibare’s project for the Musée Quai Branly; we will now turn to the ramifications of his work as monuments recalling a national past, displayed in dialogue with various facets of the heritage industry.

* * *

In his 1988 book *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford explains why the types of canonical images Shonibare references have become so powerful as to be in many senses auratically indestructible. As we have seen, Shonibare nonetheless attempts to destabilize them while simultaneously relying on and reinforcing their aura. Clifford points to C.B. Macpherson’s classic 1962 analysis of "cultural individualism," which traces the 17th century emergence of an ideal self as owner: the individual, as well as collectives, began making and remaking their identities by surrounding themselves with goods.\textsuperscript{106} In "making a cultural identity" this way, paradoxes and assumptions are revealed by the fact that goods are *selected* and *branded* as an authentic collective property, and organized into *arbitrary* systems of value and meaning.\textsuperscript{107} Clifford points out that, "Such systems, always powerful and rule-governed, change historically. One

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{107} Clifford, *Predicament*, 217. My emphases.
\end{flushleft}
cannot escape them. At best, one can transgress and 'poach' in their tabooed zones, or make their self-evident orders seem strange."  

This is exactly what Shonibare’s installations do. It is in the space between the two poles of order and dis-order (a space that could also fall into the realm of the uncanny) that the viewer is made to question why any meaning at all has become attached to a cultural object like an 18th century society portrait. Laid bare for us as if on an operating table, stripped of its gilded frame, its place on the ornate National Gallery wall, its Arcadian setting, and its subjects' "correct" costumes - not to mention their heads – the resulting tableaux estrange their sources from their place within “tradition.” Viewers know something is off, but they may nonetheless cling to what is still recognizable - the aura lingering from the original imagery and the allure attached to the rich [white] man’s version of the past.  

For Clifford, as for Shonibare, cultural objects such as Mr & Mrs Andrews, although arbitrarily chosen, are nonetheless markers of a significant social system. Clifford's tracing of the term “culture”'s lineage is instructive in unraveling the many layers of meaning Shonibare’s work plays with. Like art, culture became a general category by the 18th century, with art and culture merging in the 19th century as mutually reinforcing signifiers of human value, "strategies for gathering, marking off, protecting the best and most interesting creations of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.}\]
Man."\(^\text{109}\) Moving from the aristocratic and haut-bourgeois designations of the 19th century, by the 20th century the term “culture” took on a more anthropological meaning. By the late 20th century it became clear that, “the parallel concepts of art and culture did successfully, albeit temporarily, comprehend and incorporate a plethora of non-Western artifacts and customs.”\(^\text{110}\) The fact that “objects reclassified as primitive art were admitted to the imaginary museum of human creativity and, though more slowly, to the actual fine art museums of the West”\(^\text{111}\) illustrates this expanded – though still limited – conception of culture.

Clifford obviously has the theorist Andre Malraux in mind here. The imaginary museum, also known as the museum without walls, is a concept that was popularized by Malraux’s 1952 book *The Voices of Silence*, his rather grandiose vision of the history of world art. Malraux's conception of art is tied to a Hegelian notion of progress: art is guided by a metaphysical impetus towards increasing perfection. This system is applicable to art from all times and places, which are unified by a spiritual notion of the climax of individual style in the capital-g Genius. Malraux implicitly supports established systems of cultural valuation while rejecting the physical museum. Its dissemination of the canon is well and good, but the problem lies in the fact that its limited physical space

\(^\text{109}\) Ibid., 234  
\(^\text{110}\) Ibid., 235  
\(^\text{111}\) Ibid., my emphases
cannot properly accommodate all the works of genius in the world, and therefore, he sees museums as necessarily reductive. He observes that,

So vital is the part played by the art museum in our approach to works of art to-day that we find it difficult to realize that no museums exist, none has ever existed, in lands where the civilization of modern Europe is, or was, unknown; and that, even amongst us, they have existed for barely 200 years. They bulked so large in the 19th century and are so much part of our lives to-day that we forget they have imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude towards the work of art. For they have tended to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions and to transform even portraits into "pictures."\textsuperscript{112}

This assertion that the museum is a specifically Western institution has obvious implications for the ethnographic and anthropologic museum. Of course, his solution still valued and aestheticized the same types of non-Western items in similar ways. But nonetheless, Malraux offered an early critique not only of the way the museum organizes non-Western material, but also of the way the museum treats Western art in a similarly decontextualizing manner. He ultimately suggests that photographic reproductions eliminate reliance on the physical museum, which cannot keep pace with our knowledge of art; through them, a "Museum without Walls" is possible.

However, despite the growth not only in mechanical but also digital reproduction, the physical museum continues to hold considerable sway over both the artistic canon and the creation and maintenance of cultural identities. The museum’s continued popularity and relevance may in part be due to the inadequacy of photography to fully convey the nuances of three-dimensional art,

\textsuperscript{112} Malraux, 14
as critics of Malraux noted. The limits of a “museum without walls” have become even more pronounced since the 1960s, when an increasing amount of installation and performance art joined sculpture in the three-dimensional realm. Installations such as Shonibare’s need a space – yet must contend with the ideological baggage that any space displaying art contains. Shonibare, like many artists specializing in institutional critique, finds a solution by incorporating this baggage into his work.

According to Clifford, by 1988 the classifications of Western art and culture categories had become much less stable; due to the rise in global interconnection and discourses such as postcolonialism which exposed and contested Eurocentrism,

Art collecting and culture collecting now take place within a changing field of counter-discourses, syncretisms, and reappropriations originating both outside and inside 'The West.' . . . 'Culture' and 'art' can no longer be simply extended to non-Western peoples and things. They can at worst be imposed, at best translated - both historically and politically contingent operations.¹¹³

Shonibare's work, as ostensibly both Western and Non-Western, historical and current, is both incorporated into and omitted by all these previous markers of "culture." It is obviously part of what Clifford considers a new movement questioning the role of museums as "historical-cultural theatres of memory"¹¹⁴ by virtue of its ability to not only filter historic Western notions of culture and art through a non-Western lens, but by making work that insists on also translating

¹¹³ Clifford, Predicament, 235-36
¹¹⁴ Ibid., 248
non-Western art for “historical-cultural theatres of memory” fluent only in notions of Western culture.

Figure 3.2. Yinka Shonibare MBE. *Cl. Tarleton & Mrs. Oswald Shooting* (detail), as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007
As part of his argument for the superiority of looking at all art across time and space through reproductions in the museum without walls, Malraux points out that, "The modern art-gallery not only isolates the work of art from its context but makes it forgather with rival or even hostile works. It is a confrontation of metamorphoses." With Shonibare, however, the work aims to be the "hostile" metamorphosis infiltrating the space of the traditional museum. Such a "hostile" infiltration was made possible in July 2007, when Shonibare was invited to show work in England's premier space of historic art, the National Gallery in London.

The curatorial fellow in charge of the Shonibare installation, Jonah Albert, wrote a piece for London’s Observer in January of that year entitled “Where are the Black Visitors in my Gallery?” Albert, himself of Afro-Carribbean descent, wrote that “an obvious culprit” behind the scarcity of non-white visitors to the National Gallery was “the nature of the National Gallery’s collection: West European painting from 1200 to the turn of the 19th century. . . . To the minds of those who choose not to engage with the place, it’s little more than the work of some dead men – well, mainly dead white men.” He goes on to muse that, “The argument often put forward is that people like to see themselves in art. They want to see stories and faces they can relate to.” A very Shonibare solution for a more universalizing art in the National Gallery: off with the heads (and faces)!

---

115 Malraux, 14
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
The occasion for bringing the work of a living, non-white man into this space was the bicentenary of the first acts of Parliament to abolish the slave trade. The show was titled “Scratch the Surface,” and Shonibare re-imagined the portraits of two people with connections to the slave trade, Colonel Tarleton and Mrs. Oswald, originally painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds and Johann Zoffany, respectively. His work was to be installed in the place where the two portraits usually hung, an ornate domed space designed in the late 19th century known as the Barry rooms. While the Victorian elements had been covered up in the 1970s, by the mid-1980s the original design was reinstated, offering yet another example of the popular embrace of “Victorian values” in Thatcher-era England.

Figure 3.2. Yinka Shonibare MBE. Cl. Tarleton & Mrs. Oswald Shooting, as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007

Shonibare's work functions uniquely in this space. Unlike the other works of art surrounding it, which have been "isolated" from their original contexts in the collections of kings or aristocrats and are now part of a powerful national institution, the museum cannot have any isolating power upon Shonibare's work.
since it was made expressly for display in such a context, playing against more traditional works. In fact, one could argue that this is a most appropriate environment for his work. It is almost as if Shonibare took Malraux’s description of the space of the museum as a map for his own subversion of it:

The practice of pitting works of art against one another, an intellectual activity, is at the opposite pole from the mood of relaxation which alone makes contemplation possible. . . . For over a century our approach to art has been growing more and more intellectualized. The art museum invites criticism of each of the expressions of the world it brings together.\textsuperscript{119}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure33.png}
\caption{Yinka Shonibare MBE. \textit{Cl. Tarleton & Mrs. Oswald Shooting} (detail), as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007}
\end{figure}

Some members of the National Gallery board were obviously aware of the destabilizing presence Shonibare’s work would have in that space. He has

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
remarked that several board members refused to attend the opening on the grounds that the National Gallery was not a place for Contemporary art. He describes his installation, and its multiple types of fall-out, as follows:

Both are life-sized mannequins, dressed in Georgian outfits made of Dutch wax fabric, and both have just blown apart an unfortunate pheasant - an activity that relates to their social status and the leisured classes. The part of the gallery where the work was placed is a very busy part. It acts as a centre point, so I decided to do an installation that would happen above people's heads where it could be seen by all. The fact that they are shooting a pheasant that has exploded 'blood' on people's heads also gives it a comic element, which would have no doubt further displeased some of the National Gallery board who had objected to it in the first place.\textsuperscript{120}

Figure 3.4. Yinka Shonibare MBE. Cl. Tarleton & Mrs. Oswald Shooting (detail), as installed at the National Gallery, London. 2007

The dramatic (and comedic) tableau that resulted is not composed of direct quotations of the original portraits, like the other works examined in this paper, but it demonstrates a power analogous to that of Shonibare's more straightforwardly reproductive images of famous 18th century British paintings,

\textsuperscript{120} Downey, “Setting the Stage,” 41
such as *Mr. & Mrs. Andrews (Without Their Heads)*, whose models reside in a nearby hallway.

The National Gallery is a place where a very particular idea of “Britain” is reinforced – that of the national past with its Western European cultural roots. The museum is “not a place for Contemporary art” because that would disrupt the fantasy built up and maintained by an exclusive focus on the art made before the period in which Britain’s decline began, as well as the time when Britain was at leisure to collect the most prestigious works from the Continent. While *participating* in both the alluring beauty of the sanctioned gallery space as well as the painterly beauty of the originals, Shonibare’s sculptures are also *poaching* in the arena of this culture of reverence by alluding to multicultural identity, the darker side of the national past, and the politics of display. Through both reverence and irreverence, they question the status of the museum and its powerfully auratic pieces of cultural individualism.

But one must wonder if these acts of intervention reveal Shonibare as protestor or collaborator. Indeed, in his assessment of the Shonibare installation at the Musee Quai Branly, Ronald Jones muses that,

Shonibare's version of the fabric is fine art, but at what expense to its ethnographic legacy? Does contemporary art receive a pass on the aesthetics-versus-ethnography question because of its allegedly selfless relocation of the debate on context, or is this, too, adulteration by another name?\(^{121}\)

\(^{121}\) Jones, no page numbers
Is the situation different when the fabric is no longer in a place where its ethnic origins might “make sense?”

Hal Foster takes up the issue of the potential pitfalls of such interventions in a chapter called “The Artist as Ethnographer” from his book *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (1996). Foster discusses contemporary artists who, much like Shonibare, engage in institutional critique by “first exposing and then reframing the institutional codings of art and artifacts.” He then points out that this type of engagement might allow the artist and especially the institution to have it both ways: they “retain the social status of art and entertain the moral purity of critique.”

Shonibare’s work seems to avoid the dangers of the artist-turned-ethnographer who further cements cultural divides or exploits the “Other.” By virtue of its very ambiguity, Shonibare’s practice meets the standards Foster proposes for those he deems “relevant” artists within the “artist-as-ethnographer” trend: his work

Resists further primitivizing and anthropologizing through a parodic trickstering of these very processes . . . a reversal of ethnographic roles [which] disturbs a dominant culture that depends on strict stereotypes, stable lines of authority, and humanist reanimations and museological resurrections of many sorts.

One of the few anomalies in Shonibare’s impressively consistent sculptural oeuvre illustrates how acutely aware Shonibare is of Britain’s “museological resurrections of many sorts.” It is his only three-dimensional piece that does not incorporate the signature headless figures, yet it speaks perhaps

122 Foster, “Artist as Ethnographer,” 196
123 Ibid., 199
even more boldly of Shonibare’s role as reverse ethnographer, offering what I propose is a comment on the origins of ethnography. 

*The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour* was created for the 1997 Okwui Enwezor-helmed Johannesburg Biennale, the event’s second and final edition. Shonibare’s piece resembles a sound stage, with the plywood supports for its three walls in plain view; its “fourth wall” is covered with a velvet rope, drawing allusions to the ubiquitous British period room. Yet its walls are “papered” with Dutch wax fabric sporting African footballers, and the furniture is upholstered in a contrasting Dutch wax. Enwezor has described the piece as taking on “the British obsession with recreating period rooms and wax museums as dioramas of tourist kitsch,” in addition to representing a feeling of postcolonial nostalgic longing which makes explicit the emptiness of the notion of “home.”124 Shonibare himself describes the work as follows: 

…the idea behind it is to draw a parallel with the relationship between the contemporary first-world and third-world countries. I want to show that behind excessive lifestyles there are people who have to provide the labor to make this kind of lifestyle happen.125

Both explanations are satisfactory, but neither engages with history in ways suggested by the room’s role as an altered historic “reality” explicit in its construction as a space of display.

---

124 Enwezor, *Mirror’s Edge*, 227 and 223
125 [http://edu.warhol.org/app_shonibare.html](http://edu.warhol.org/app_shonibare.html); accessed 03/26/2011
Unlike many of the period rooms on display in museums or in grand estates, this room seems much more modest. Shonibare’s Victorian philanthropist lived comfortably, but not extravagantly. Perhaps the owner was a successful merchant whose imports connected him directly to colonial trade routes; but what if, rather than directly exploiting the colonial resources, this man exploited the colonial culture? What if the Dutch wax wallpaper and furnishings, covered in African footballers, indicate that, for this Victorian philanthropist, Africa was not a business, but, like football, a hobby?

In her article “Blinded by Science: Ethnography at the British Museum,” Annie Coombes discusses the history of the Ethnography department at the British Museum, from its collection of plundered items like the Benin bronzes to its physical remove from the actual body of the museum in 1970, when it relocated to Burlington Gardens as the Museum of Mankind. Integral to its
history, she contends, were the “armchair anthropologists” – upper middle-class Britons who essentially founded and popularized the discipline of Anthropology from their parlors in the 1890s. She cites people like E.B. Tylor, often called the father of modern anthropology, who relied on fieldwork done by various civil servants, military personnel and colonial administrators while he worked “in his Oxford study.” Furthermore, these armchair anthropologists incited a public demand for formal State ethnographic collections based on the argument that a core element behind the public support for imperialism in Britain’s colonial rival Germany was the importance that nation’s government afforded its ethnographic collections. The tactic worked, but an ethnography department in the British Museum still wasn’t enough; Coombes cites a 1910 “Handbook to the British Museum Ethnographic Collections” which argued for a separate museum dedicated to the topic:

At no point in the world’s history has any one nation exercised control over so many primitive races as our own at the present time, and yet there is no [independent] institution in Great Britain where this fact is adequately brought before the public in a concrete form. The ethnography department became a “concrete form” in 1970, when it moved to the Museum of Mankind.

The ethnographic collections seemingly rejected many of these earlier conceits – at least in terms of PR - when it was renamed “The Department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas” and rejoined the main site of the British

---

126 Coombes, 106
127 Cited in Coombes, 113
Museum in 1997 – the same year that Shonibare’s parlor had its debut in the second biennial held in South Africa. In a move both more subtle and more brazen than any of his previous or subsequent sculptural works, The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour reintegrates the site of the origins of British Imperial ethnography with the type of site central to the cause of the 1980s’ “Heritage Industry:” the period room. Displayed in the context of the former third world’s attempt at an equal footing with the west, this work literally puts Shonibare’s postcolonial vision of reverse-ethnography on a global stage. The historic assumptions underlying the birth of anthropology are shown to be as hollow as this explicitly fake room, along with the cultural nostalgia that overlooks such unsavory underpinnings of the national past. The sculpture in essence stages the Victorian philanthropist’s environment for a post-colonial audience in a manner parallel to how an ethnographic museum might have displayed its so-called primitive environments – complete with convenient, ideologically-driven historical distortions.

* * *

Museums have changed substantially since critics like Bennett, Mitchell, Bhabha, and Clifford made their marks in the theory of institutional and postcolonial critique. In fact, while the Quai Branly may still be on the lagging end of these improvements, Clifford and other commentators see the British Museum – and especially the presentation of its anthropologic collections – as having taken steps forward. In a preface to the 2009 version of his book On Living in an
Old Country (1985), which Hewison himself credits with having coined the phrase “The Heritage Industry,” Patrick Wright sees the need to reevaluate some of his earlier contentions. “It is an indication of how much museums have changed since then,” he writes,

That this idea of history breaking into a closed and pristinely separated display now seems curiously old fashioned. Assassination attempts are surely still barred, but in more recent decades, many museums have actively embraced a wider sense of historicity. The British Museum may never have been an entirely inert reliquary but its director now promotes it as ‘the place where different cultures meet.’

While this sounds suspiciously similar to the slogan of another anthropological museum (“Là où dialoguent les cultures” is the Musee Quai Branly’s catchphrase), writers like Clifford, who have been highly critical of missteps in anthropological display, also praise the British Museum. In a footnote in his article on the Branly, Clifford compares that institution to the “very different museological world” found in the Sainsbury African Galleries of the British Museum:

Here, contemporary African art is displayed in counterpoint to more traditional pieces. . . . The galleries are evenly lit, mystery is banished, and a dynamic, inventive, lucid world is evoked. Famous bronze plaques from the palace of Benin, displayed to great aesthetic effect, are described in a nearby historical label as ‘booty’ from an 1897 military expedition . . .

Elsewhere in the same text, in another footnote, Clifford applauds the fact that the British Museum’s JP Morgan Chase Gallery of North America “makes history the guiding strand for objects and interpretations . . . Many of the objects are

---

Wright, xiii
Clifford, “Quai Branly in Process,” fn 5, pp. 14
beautiful, but it takes an effort to think of them as ‘art.’”\(^{130}\) In closing her article “Blinded by Science,” Coombes, writing the year before the reintegration of the Museum of Mankind with the British Museum’s main campus, expressed her hope that the move would provide a fresh beginning. She reasons, “After so much interrogation of ethnography and anthropology both within and without these disciplines, perhaps the limited challenges which both could offer to the hegemony of western culture will finally emerge.”\(^{131}\) As Clifford confirms, indeed, they have apparently made a start.

However, there is no doubt that we are still in a time of transition, and work like Shonibare’s, through its alluring and often humorous evocations of the past, discourages complacency. Shonibare is an excellent spokesman for projecting this type of awareness without preaching. He has said that, “I do not want to do a ‘theory’ of art; I wanted to do art, to do artifice, and to do ‘pleasure.”\(^{132}\) As often as there are acute critiques in his work, there are appreciations in equal measure, not only for the historic settings, portraits and beautiful costumes one finds in the sites celebrating national heritage, but also for the value of anthropological museums. “I don’t like the way the objects were acquired, politically,” he admits, “But culturally, I am happy that some of the objects are there and I can see them.”\(^{133}\)

\(^{130}\) Ibid., fn 6, pp. 15
\(^{131}\) Coombes, 117
\(^{132}\) Downey, “Yinka Shonibare in Conversation,” no page numbers
\(^{133}\) Muller, 20
While honestly reflecting the benefits and pleasures of the places that display historic art or encourage cultural nostalgia, despite Shonibare’s disavowal of theory in favor of art and pleasure, the fact remains that his work must also be read as critical. His three-dimensional installations expose glossy historical dramas and spaces as enjoyable but ultimately unnatural presentations of the past; this burden is visceral and undeniable – it occurs on a scrap of exotic fabric lining a fantasy we might literally walk into, or it explodes overhead. Despite progress in museums’ grounding of the past within a more nuanced historical framework, Shonibare’s sculptures expose the enduring dangers of historicized fantasies.
Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to expand upon the ways select examples from Yinka Shonibare’s three-dimensional repertoire operate both in and of themselves and within their place of display. The majority of the scholarship the previous chapters examined was published during the 1980s, and this has been a deliberate attempt to uncover the types of ideas circulating during Yinka Shonibare’s formative years as an artist. Strands of the various theories made popular during this era seem to be, if not purposefully incorporated into Shonibare’s work, then at least productively reflected in it, persisting even into his most current projects.

Part of the appeal of Shonibare’s work is its openness to a wide range of interpretations. There are certainly multiple ways in which one might analyze Shonibare’s sculptures, and this thesis only touches on a few of them in the hopes of achieving something of a coherent argument. For example, the notion of the uncanny, while accounting for the more sinister sides of Shonibare’s art historical allusions and providing a link to the 18th century, may not sufficiently allow for a discussion of the co-existence of humor and irony as equally powerful critiques. Additionally, alternative modes of vocalizing certain effects of the sculptures, which I have described as “uncanny,” are also possible. Jeanette Kohl has offered the very astute observation that perhaps Shonibare’s sculptures align more with a Brechtian verfremdungseffekt, or “distancing effect,” than an
uncanny one, with its unavoidable Freudian associations. The explicit theatricality of Brecht’s use of the term is certainly amenable to Shonibare’s tableaux vivantes. Ultimately, however, I think that for the purposes of this paper, the uncanny offers a powerful link to both the imperial past as well as to surrealism. While this latter link might also have been explored in more detail, I think it suffices to simply point out that surrealism, as the locus of the counter-modern within the early twentieth century modern art movements, offers a fitting parallel to the place Shonibare’s sculptures occupy within Postmodernism’s analogous late-twentieth century privileging of the démodé.

Enwezor claimed that tropes such as postmodernism were, by the mid-1990s, “burning out their tapers,” but by collapsing the outdated binaries these categories were built on, Enwezor saw Shonibare as creating something fresh. Has today’s question become whether such hybrids are also heading towards obsolescence and redundancy? Perhaps this is why some critics, such as Art in America’s Faye Hirsch, have begun to find his work tiresome. "As usual," she writes in the June 2008 issue, which featured Shonibare on its cover, “Shonibare makes [his figures] headless, a reference [ ] to the Revolution's guillotine and the Enlightenment's dark fallout.” She seemingly stifles a yawn, and inserts the conspiratorial aside that, “(and I have to confess the formula is beginning to

---

134 Thesis defense, 04/13/11.
135 Thanks to Liz Kotz for pointing this out.
136 Op cit., 21
137 Hirsch, 189
make me fidgety).” But more important than if the visual formula makes us fidgety is the question of whether Shonibare’s formula of critique is still relevant.

Shonibare’s three-dimensional works, whether we consider them formulaic or fresh, outmoded or enduringly relevant, remain dynamic in their ability to, if nothing else, catch our attention. In the end, his uncanny figures, in tandem with the spaces they inhabit, cannot but inspire important reflections on how one views the various histories Shonibare’s installations evoke. Whether they inspire a yearning to be “as powerful, liberated and debauched as these figures of history” or a yawn, a confrontation with Shonibare’s figures elicits a parallel confrontation with our own very current desires, aesthetic expectations, and notions of history and culture.

Shonibare’s sculptures and installations echo what, in 1983, Benjamin Buchloh saw as Michael Asher’s triumph over “the new historicism of Post-Modernism where regressions into a mythical language cover the problematic conditions of the present.” Buchloh quotes an Artforum writer’s “rhapsodizing” of the new Post-Modernist movement, which also describes some of the most powerful elements that would come to characterize Shonibare’s work a decade later:

. . . Avant-garde art in general, with its oppressive neutrality of content, has a long history of being perceived by the public at large as irrelevant. Its abstractness, however, is not the problem as much as its failure to conduct a public dialogue. Belief or conviction on the part of the artist,

---

138 Ibid.
139 Dawson, no page numbers.
140 Buchloh, “Michael Asher and the Conclusion of Modern Sculpture.”
while perhaps the most important single ingredient of a great work of art, is not, as far as the public is concerned, a substitute for symbolic content. . The artists who succeed there . . will be those who are willing to come to terms with the notion of public commitment, who realize that such a stance, far from compromising their work, can infuse it with non-esthetic content which has absented itself from modernist art. ¹⁴¹

By refusing to adapt to, but rather, by incorporating certain monumentalizing historic tendencies, Asher’s method of institutional intervention averted the dangers Buchloh saw in the populism of the new movement which, in his opinion, led sculptors to create public monuments that, at the behest of governing powers, conveyed a sense that “history as process and change has been concluded.”¹⁴² With hindsight, Shonibare has internalized both populism and Asher’s critical model of historicity.

As predicted in the Introduction to this thesis, I conclude with a confirmation of the power of hybridity in Shonibare’s work. But I hope that this new sense of hybridity – the powerful combination of monumental populist appeal with the history of institutional critique through qualities specific to three-dimensional work – will, if not breathe new life into a viewing of Shonibare’s practice, at least argue for its continued relevance as a historic solution to problems of viewing, incorporating, and displaying multiple types of histories.

¹⁴² Buchloh, 293
Bibliography


Albert, Jonah. “Where are the black visitors in my gallery?” *The Observer*, 01/07/07. Accessed online at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/jan/07/arts.visualarts


———. “Everything We Look At is a Kind of Troy.” In Sugimoto, 54-65.


Court, Elsbeth. “Africa on Display: exhibiting art by Africans.” Rpt. in Barker, pp. 147-174


Preziosi, Donald. “The Crystalline Veil and the Phallomorphic Imaginary.” In Filipovic, 30-49.


