Yinka Shonibare
Dressing Down

Richard Hylton

Yinka Shonibare’s art reveals a world in which African and European history can be distilled into a ‘beginners guide’, where the Victorian era is typified by class division, suppressed libido and missionary zeal, and Africa is characterised as the land of the exotic and the primitive. This binary forms the backbone of Shonibare’s project and his first major solo exhibition at the Ikon Gallery.

The colonial, often the sub-text of the Victorian novel, is brought to centre stage in Bonnet 1, in which Shonibare employs his stock-in-trade African fabric. Double Dutch (1994) and Baby Blue (1998) present lustrous pink and blue backdrops for canvases made up of African fabric, arranged in grid form, sporadically covered in synthetic impasto paint. For Okwui Enwezor these works represent a “playing off the ethnic stereotype Afro-kitsch against the imperial irony of the colonial kitsch”. For me, these painting installations possess a particularly perverse quality that has enabled them to be located in what, on the surface at least, appear to be very different art camps. From the so-called ‘cutting edge’ gallery, to the not so ‘cutting edge’ front cover of a recent Arts Council of England’s Cultural Diversity Report.

Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour (1996–97) eschews the visual synergy found in his kitsch painting installations. Homemade clashing fabrics parody Shonibare’s usual market-bought lengths, covering reproduction antique furniture, armchair, chaise longue, walls, rug, etc, they inscrutably incorporate images of contemporary black footballers. Is this a cryptic eulogy to the Victorian Arthur Wharton, England’s first black footballer? The seemingly tawdry nature of this piece is further exemplified by the lengths of two-by-one which support the walls of this tableau, as if it were the set of a never-to-be-made period drama.

Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads (1998) is a life size sculptural remake of the characters from Thomas Gainsborough’s famous 18th century painting, originally commissioned by the Andrews, and as such represented a vehicle for showing off their aristocratic wealth, bound as it was in land. The painting, housed in London’s National Gallery, was made more famous in the 1970s by John Berger’s Ways of Seeing which placed the work within a social historical context. Shonibare seizes the Andrews and their dog and positions them on a white plinth in front of a white background. Their headless bodies, a common feature in Shonibare’s work, here assume a brutality, less apparent in other works, and take Berger’s reading a step further, suggesting that the blood and sweat of not only the English peasant, but also the African, is on the aristocratic hand. As many of Shonibare’s works produced over the past five years focus on the woman’s body (How Does a Girl Like You Get to be a Girl Like You?, 1995, for example), it was a touch surprising that none of these were included in this show. These works evoke the fragility of white womanhood whose repressed desires found redemption and intrigue in the exotic body. Naturally, this is another neat stereotype, a ‘Carry On Up the Colonies’, but one nevertheless which Shonibare is able to milk with much aplomb.

Diary of a Victorian Dandy (1998) which represents an occasional departure for Shonibare from fabric readymades to photography, alludes to the likes of Ignatius Sancho, an African man of letters (also, incidentally, painted by Thomas Gainsborough), who enjoyed life in the upper echelons of 18th century English society. Produced as a series of five 9ft x 6ft prints, (two of which were shown at the Ikon), the photographs chart a day in the life of an African dandy, from being doted on by his white servants, to businessman, gambler, snob of the orgy and, finally, social butterfly. Beyond a simplistic reclamation of black British history, which they enact, what else do these images offer? If the Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour’s employment of kitsch was slightly problematic, it becomes a major headache here. Through the combination of period setting, hammer acting (sometimes involving cross-dressing), and imitation gilt frames, Shonibare makes it brazenly clear that Victorian history is a construct. The twist being Shonibare’s role as the dandy. In his catalogue essay Okwui Enwezor states, “These photographic tableaux have all the qualities, charm, and artifice of Merchant-Ivory film stills.” I am not unimpressed.

Originally commissioned by the Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) and Autograph, a number of these images were reproduced as posters for the London Underground. In that transient environment, these images perhaps work buried in amongst cacophony of advertising. Yet, presented in the gallery context, the sum of the parts seem little more than an
inadvertent and extravagant promo for the heritage industry, which for all their artifice could be the intention. However, given its reliance on the photographic medium, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* lacks the dexterity found in the work of artists like Faisal Abdu’ Allah and Bridget Smith, whose affinity for the medium enables them to engage with it beyond pure expediency.

*Alien Obsessives: Mum Dad and the Kids* (1998) provides another witty inversion of the black/white binary and a slight respite from Shonibare’s own Victorian obsession. Half-size African extraterrestrials dotted around the gallery illustrate the gamesome predilection of Shonibare’s work. It is this spirit which, if read as strategy, makes the work most interesting. Knowing the market within which he operates, and leaving little to chance, Shonibare cuts his cloth accordingly. Some of his couplings invariably work better than others. Holistically, their consumer friendly nature implies a knowing expediency on the part of the artist. This suggests the primitive/civilised, African/Victorian dichotomies are a dressed up and polished commentary, which in fact say as much about the structures of artist/gallery or artist/curator in our

*Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour, 1996–97, installation with reproduction furniture, fire screen, marble fireplace, carpet, props, African fabric; dimensions variable according to installation

Courtesy of the Stephen Friedman Gallery, London
times as they do about so-called ‘postcolonial narratives’. The so-called postcolonial interpretation, although not untrue, has been too easily foisted upon the work. There is nothing inherently wrong with Shonibare’s tactics. The music industry does this all the time, one only need think of strange bedfellows like Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder or Run DMC and Aerosmith. These pairings say as much about market expedience as about the songs they have produced, raising the question — what is more appealing, the packaging or the music?

From this perspective Shonibare’s work adopts a slightly more satirical, if not derisive, tone in dishing up readily digestible critiques. However, if there was a limit to the mileage made from songs like *Ebony & Ivory* or *Walk this Way*, I have to ask, how far can Shonibare’s fabrics stretch?

‘Yinka Shonibare, Dressing Down’ was at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England, from February 10th to April 4th, 1999.