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YINKA SHONIBARE'S FABRIC-INSPIRED SCULPTURES UNVEILED AT CHICAGO'S MCA

Text by [Michael Slenske](#)
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Wind Sculpture MCA Chicago Plaza Project, 2014.
Photo: Nathan Keay and courtesy of MCA Chicago

Last summer Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) Chicago curator Naomi Beckwith saw Yinka Shonibare's first *Wind Sculpture* on the cover of his catalogue *Fabric-ation* and immediately knew it was tailor-made for a public art project at the Josef Paul Kleihues–designed institution. "The sculpture was beautiful and dynamic and I immediately marched into our chief curator Michael Darling's office and said: 'Plaza Project!'" says Beckwith, referring to the esplanade in front of the museum's Indiana-limestone stairs, which previously hosted site-specific commissions by Mark Handforth, Martin Creed, and Amanda Ross-Ho.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Shonibare's three works for MCA, which are nearly 20 feet tall, follow on the heels of his 2010 sculpture in London's Trafalgar Square: a massive ship-in-a-bottle replica of Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson's vessel used in the Battle of Trafalgar. As is the case with nearly all of the Nigerian-raised, London-based artist's installations of the past two decades, the sails were crafted from the same European-made textile that's been inspired by Indonesian batik for centuries. "He realized then that the fabrics could be shapes in and of themselves," Beckwith says.



Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, Trafalgar Square, London, 2010.
Photo courtesy of James Cohan Gallery

But instead of sourcing his materials for the *Wind Sculptures* from textiles found in the markets of London's East End, Shonibare and his team devised the sculptures' patterns from scratch. Through this process, the monument-size works—built from a steel armature coated with a painted fiberglass resin cast—give the appearance of paper-thin fabrics billowing in the wind. "Each pattern was hand-painted, layer by layer, imitating the exact way batik fabrics are printed," says Beckwith. "Shonibare also played with shapes and ultimately landed on the forms that exist now—like the fabrics are pinned to the ground at one point and are dancing and snapping in the wind. They just look incredible against the backdrop of the MCA and perfectly offset the rational gray tones of the museum's cladding."

In addition to providing a pleasing aesthetic, the works also further the artist's dialogue on "difference, cultural fluidity, cultural markers, new authenticities," explains Beckwith. "The very things that make up the fabric of a city like Chicago."

Through October 31, 2014, at MCA Chicago; mcachicago.org