Prints charming

Yinka Shonibare confronts colonialism and its aftermath using irony rather than vitriol, challenging stereotypes through works in which colourful African fabrics set a playful tone. Michael Watts visits him at his studio

Photographs by Nick Ballon
Like the Queen of Hearts in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare has a thing about heads. Many, if not most, of his figurative sculptures have misplaced them. In Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads (1998), his remaking of Gainsborough’s famous 18th-century painting, he has tremendous fun posing the decorous couple, minus heads, in imitation of the original – itself a subversion, whose pastoral airs blurred their actual marriage of convenience. For Shonibare, people without heads began as a play on how elites were guillotined during the French Revolution. Since they have no heads, they cannot be identified, and become ambiguous, intriguing. Sometimes he replaces heads with globes to signify Everyman or –woman. ‘Metaphors for humanity’, he calls them. The loss of heads can also suggest, quite literally, brainlessness. In his splendid installation Scramble for Africa (2003), he indicts 19th-century European imperialism by placing headless mannequins at a conference table; these ‘heads’ of state are squabbling like rats over a map of Africa, whose territories they are carving up.

The brilliant African patterns with which he clothes or paints his sculptures are Shonibare’s other personal signifier. Jeff Koons has his balloon dogs, Damien Hirst his pickled wildlife. Chris Ofili, another British-Nigerian, six years younger than Shonibare, made elephant dung his calling card. Shonibare’s brand, if you like, is the exotic.»
‘You can fix the world through art. You can make it better or more bearable. It’s the thing you do to get away from the horrible things in the world’

Ankara prints – colloquially known as ‘Dutch wax fabrics’ – he found in the African and Caribbean shops of Brixton, south London. They are Africa’s national costume. But Shonibare uses them to subvert history and context. He puts them on impossibly subjects, from 18th-century landed gentry to astronauts. At first sight, they look merely cheerful and amusing; a slow burn later, they make you think and wonder. His weightier purpose, as with Scramble for Africa, is to critique Europe’s abusive relationship with Africa and the legacies of colonialism. He says that if it’s all right for Picasso to steal influences from Africa, why is an African not permitted to pilfer from the Western canon? ‘We should all have the freedom to plagiarise as much as we like,’ he says gently. ‘All artists are thieves. If you don’t steal, then you’ll never make a good artist.’ Identity and authenticity have preoccupied him ever since, as a young man at Goldsmiths college, he designed an artwork about the Cold War. A tutor urged him to focus instead on ‘authentic African art’. But, he thought, what does ‘authentic African art’ mean to a post-colonial hybrid like himself, brought up on the cultures of both Nigeria and England? His symbolic wax fabrics are far from ‘authentically African’: they are a product of globalisation, derived from methods of batik in Indonesia, once a Dutch colony, and manufactured in Holland and Lancashire for sale in West Africa. They never quite lose their ‘African-ness’, however. Seeing his sculptures of aliens or astronauts dressed in African prints (in ‘African-ness’, however. Seeing his sculptures of aliens or astronauts dressed in African prints (in Dysfunctional Family, 1999, and in Vacation, 2000), you might say: ‘Wow! Africans in space! Perhaps you smile, and then: but why not African astronauts? His 1994 painting Double Dutch was an early investigation into the semiotics of textiles. It shows small, deep squares of overpainted fabric placed on a hot-pink wall. Crucially, Charles Saatchi saw it, and in 1997 put Shonibare in his Sensation exhibition at the Royal Academy. He was more of a bit player then on the British art scene: the shock tactics of YBAs such as Hirst and Tracey Emin were what commanded public attention, whereas Shonibare’s art is more playful and theatrical, rich in jokes and erudition but with a dark undertow – Dadarst rather than confrontational. As Stephen Deuchar, the former director of Tate Britain,
We're not talking about politics or journalism, we're talking about art, which is a form of poetry
just human nature. People who take that attitude about Brexit should understand African views of colonialism. But there's no point getting angry about it [colonialism]. You have to transform that into something productive. You can't hold onto it, otherwise you'd be seething, and rancour creates more rancour. But we're not talking about politics or journalism here, we're talking about art - which is a form of poetry. I make work that can be poetic.'

He certainly does – putting his clever spin on big themes like climate change, for example, without being explicit. 'I'm very suspicious of taking sides,' he explained. 'History has shown that you can easily take the wrong one, like the way the Communists found a few useful idiots [in the West]. I've always done things my own way, and no one has tried to persuade me otherwise.' Even in his youth, he was not like Donald Rodney and the BLK movement, those angry young black men of the 1980s who harangued British art institutions about racism.

He knew Rodney, the child of poor Jamaican immigrants. Rodney wanted to recreate the Tate out of sugar cubes, to attack a totemic museum built from sweated labour in the cane fields of the West Indies, but he died young of sickle-cell anaemia. Shonibare, himself struck by a virus that no amount of privilege could prevent, went a diferent way. He has become, in his own phrase, the Trojan horse of the art world, smuggling his weapons of irony and satire past defences. There's no anger, at least publicly. I asked him if he ever lost his temper. 'I guess the screaming is best done through my work,' he said softly.

◆

'A Tale of Today: Yinka Shonibare CBE' is at the Driehaus Museum in Chicago, 2 March–29 September. driehausmuseum.org. See page 020