



Yinka Shonibare, MBE, *Europe (The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters)*, 2007, 71.65 x 49 inches (182 x 124.5 cm)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Yinka Shonibare, MBE:
Prospero's Monsters
April 17 – May 17, 2008**

**Reception for the artist: Thursday,
April 17, 6 – 8 pm**

James Cohan Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by Yinka Shonibare, MBE. Shonibare's three-part installation of sculpture and photography revisits the collision between irrational mysticism and logical reason that occurred in society during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period. The artist's work often concerns itself with the history of colonization and its ensuing struggles. Here, the artist intimates that western democracy's current conquests may similarly invoke physical or psychological conflict.

The installation opens with a room-sized, battered frigate, which dangerously lists as if it is about to sink. Set against the photographic backdrop of the same model ship perilously afloat in a stormy sea, Shonibare's sculpture appears as both a dramatic stage set and a two-dimensional image come to life. The work recalls the devastating wreck of the French ship, *Medusa*, off the coast of Senegal in 1819; the appalling conditions faced by its survivors were imagined by Théodore Géricault's 1819 painting, *The Raft of the Medusa*. The artist also alludes to William Shakespeare's 1611 play, *The Tempest*, which tells the story of the sorcerer Prospero, who, marooned on an island, conjures a shipwreck to lead his jealous brother, Antonio, to him. The shipwreck, which is never staged in the play, here is given a tangible form. The sculpture introduces the artist's exhibition and is the visual equivalent of Shakespeare's "tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning" with which he begins his tale.

The main gallery space features five sculptural vignettes based upon the key thinkers of the Enlightenment: Jean le Rond d'Alembert, Gabrielle Emile Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, Immanuel Kant, Antoine Lavoisier and Adam Smith. It is a pivotal arrangement around which the exhibition's ideas coalesce, as Shonibare uses theater and history to

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metaphorically discuss the current political climate. Each sculpted figure is depicted with a different disability, which references the artist's own autobiography--Shonibare was left disabled by a virus contracted in his late teens--but which also employs disability to introduce a different perspective into the liberated world of ideas and reason. Just as the part-man, part-beast character of Caliban in *The Tempest* was empowered through poetic language but never fully gained his freedom from Prospero, so the Enlightenment thinkers who caused civilization to flourish also burdened its members with the desire to conquer.

On view in the back gallery is a photographic series based on Francisco Goya y Luciente's etching, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, from his 1799 *Los Caprichos* print series. In each of the five photographs, menacing animals swirl about the sleeping figure, whose ethnicity changes with every image. All wear Victorian-style garments made from richly-hued African textiles—in fact, materials that were previously imported by the Dutch to Africa and have become so closely associated with the continent that they are assumed to be indigenous. Shonibare emphasizes the complexity of cultural identity while arguing for a delicate balance between fantasy and the real, a sentiment shared by Goya, who warned, "Imagination deserted by reason, begets impossible monsters. United with reason, she is the mother of all arts, and the source of their wonders."

Yinka Shonibare, MBE (b.1962) is a painter, photographer, filmmaker, and installation artist. His art is influenced by both the cultures of Nigeria, where he grew up, and England, where he studied and now lives. He has exhibited widely throughout the world, and was shortlisted for the prestigious Turner Prize in 2004. The artist's work was included in the African pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007, and his numerous group shows include *William Hogarth* (2006, organized by Musée du Louvre, Paris); *War and Discontent* (2007, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts); and *African Art Today: An Unbounded Vista* (November 2008, Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri). His public sculpture proposal for the Fourth Plinth site in London's Trafalgar is one of six included in the final round of consideration, and it is presently on view at the National Gallery in London. Among Shonibare's recent solo exhibitions are a 2006 self-titled exhibition at the Speed Museum (Louisville, KY), *The Hayward Flag Project* (2007, The Hayward Gallery, London), *Le jardin d'amour* (2007, Musée de quai Branly, Paris), and *Scratch the Surface* (2007, National Portrait Gallery, London). His film *Odile and Odette* is presently on view at the Savannah College of Art and Design, ACA Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia, and the artist will be the subject of a mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia (Fall 2008), which will travel to the Brooklyn Museum. Shonibare was awarded the prestigious title of Member of the British Empire in 2005.

To access press and other relevant articles, please consult Yinka Shonibare's artist page at www.jamescohan.com.

For further information about the exhibition, please contact Jane Cohan at jane@jamescohan.com or telephone 212-714-9500.