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Prospero’s Monsters: Authenticity, Identity, and Hybridity in the Post-Colonial Age

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In 2005, Yinka Shonibare was offered the prestigious distinction of becoming recognized as a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE). As an artist whose work is characterized by his direct engagement with and critiques of power, the establishment, colonialism and imperialism, in many cases specifically relating to Britain’s past and present, some questioned whether he was going to refuse the honor. This inquiry was perhaps encouraged by assumptions stemming from Shonibare’s identity as a London-born, Nigerian-raised artist. However, for Shonibare, the fact that the establishment acknowledged him in such a way, especially given the subjects of his work, was interesting and useful.\(^1\) As an MBE, not only would Shonibare occupy a curious position as a “distinguished participant in a vanished entity”, but he would also be identified as an insider in the establishment – a position that would allow him to make an impact from within rather than from without – not unlike a Trojan horse.\(^2\) Ultimately, Shonibare not only accepted the MBE but incorporated it as an ironic part of his professional, artistic identity instead of refusing it in a political act, as stepping away from the establishment would only create convenience for it.\(^3\) In many ways, this manner of acceptance and incorporation in which Yinka Shonibare handled his MBE reflects the essential themes and motivations that are clearly discernable in the entirety of his oeuvre, which ranges from the late 1990s to more recent works today.

Shortly after receiving his MBE, from April 17\(^{th}\) to May 17\(^{th}\), 2008, Shonibare’s work was exhibited at the James Cohan Gallery in New York City in a show entitled *Prospero’s Monsters*. The show was organized into three galleries – La Méduse, The Age of Enlightenment and The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters – each of which contained works of the same name.

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\(^3\) Ibid, 31-32.
This study will focus on the bookends of the show, the first and last galleries, which consisted of seven works in total, in the first: the *La Méduse* multimedia sculpture/diorama and chromogenic print and in the second, the five piece *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* series, each of which references a particular continent (Africa, Europe, America, Australia, Asia). While the entire exhibition is saturated with references to the Age of Enlightenment, unlike the gallery of the same name (which focuses on selected Enlightenment Age thinkers), the La Méduse and The Sleep of Reason galleries have more direct allusions to highly recognizable European artworks—Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* and Francisco Goya y Luciente’s *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* respectively. Bolstered by the captivating title of the exhibition, studying both *La Méduse* and *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* allows for a thorough exploration of the motifs of identity, hybridity, and authenticity that Yinka Shonibare MBE engages by combining overt and often satirical references to Western art history, as well as utilizing the “African” Dutch Wax cloth, both of which critique and challenge assumptions about African art—the unexpected synthesis of which not only echoes Shonibare’s personal dual identity as a British and Nigerian artist, but also touches upon the international categorization of Black artists in the contemporary art world.

Crucial to contextualizing the *La Méduse* artworks and *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* series within the exhibition is an investigation of the layered connotations of the title, *Prospero’s Monsters*, and how it supports and deepens the motifs of the exhibition and connects the galleries thematically. The title very clearly references William Shakespeare’s last play, *The Tempest*, which was published in 1611, roughly thirty to forty years before the acknowledged beginning of the Enlightenment. The narrative of *The Tempest* is set in motion by the dramatic event of a shipwreck, a plot device used to great effect by Shakespeare in several plays. In this
instance, the usurped Duke of Milan, Prospero, uses his power as a magician to shipwreck his traitorous brother Antonio and his crew, which includes the King of Naples, Alonso, as well as the king’s brother, Sebastian and his son, Ferdinand (among others), on the same island where Prospero and his daughter Miranda were exiled twelve years previously. The first act also introduces us to Prospero’s two other companions on his enchanted island – The magical spirit Ariel, under Prospero’s command since he freed the spirit from his imprisonment at the hands of the “damned witch” Sycorax, and Caliban, the physically deformed son of the witch who had been with child when sailors stranded her on the island. Though recognized as one of Shakespeare’s comedies, a romantic one at that, exemplified by the eventual marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand, The Tempest also contains more sober themes centering on “the intersection of reason and irrationality, darkness and light”, most pertinent to this study in terms of the character of Caliban – Prospero’s “monster” and his relationship to Prospero, his master.

Speaking about the Prospero’s Monsters show with Anthony Downey in 2008, Shonibare expressed that he “felt it was a good title to frame the exhibition because in a broader context I am talking about the relationship between the other and the master”. When we enter the narrative Caliban is a slave to Prospero but as Caliban argues, he is a native and the island should by all rights be his by virtue of his mother Sycorax. In his first appearance, Caliban expounds upon his relationship with Prospero saying:

When thou cam’st first/ Thou strok’dst me, and made much of me; wouldst give me/

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Water with berries in’t; and teach me how/ To name the bigger light and how the less…

And then I loved thee/ And showed thee all the qualities o’ th’ isle, / The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile/ Cursed be I that did so.\(^8\)

As this monologue suggests, when the two first met, Prospero aimed to “civilize” Caliban, teaching him his language and the codifications that accompanied it. However, when Caliban deviates from civilized behaviors and attempts to violate Miranda’s honor, Prospero enslaves him.\(^9\) Despite his enslavement, Caliban is not as passive of a character as his position might suggest. It is this resistance that chiefly attracted Shonibare to the play. Caliban’s refusal to be civilized, his refusal to be grateful for learning Prospero’s language, saying in what Shonibare describes as quite irreverent terms, “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/ Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!”\(^10\) Shonibare interpreted these lines as a form of empowerment, an exchange that can be read as a representation for the conflict between the colonizers and colonized, one of the central themes addressed in both \textit{La Méduse} and \textit{The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters} in terms of their historical context as well as how they have informed contemporary issues of identity, authenticity, and globalization.

While Shonibare’s use of \textit{The Tempest} as a way to allude to the “Enlightenment ideal of reason and its “dark” opposite” has specific ties to the Prospero’s Monster’s exhibition, it also provides a entry point by which to delve into the methods and motivations of Yinka Shonibare MBE as a contemporary artist and as an artist with deep connections to both Britain and Nigeria.\(^11\) However, before fully connecting Shonibare’s use of \textit{The Tempest} to his identity as a mature artist, it is imperative to explore his origins and development. Yinka Shonibare was born

\(^8\) Shakespeare, \textit{The Tempest}, 19-20
\(^9\) Kent, "Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE", 21
\(^10\) Shakespeare, \textit{The Tempest}, 21
\(^11\) Kent, "Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE", 21
in London in 1962, where his parents were living in order to prepare for leadership positions as part of the newly independent (1960) Nigerian elite. The Shonibare family moved back to Nigeria and settled in Lagos when Yinka was only three years old, cementing the “pattern of transhumance” that took place between Lagos, where he was raised and educated and London, where he spent summer vacations, pursued his undergraduate and graduate degrees, and where he currently lives and works. In an interview with Andrew M. Goldstein, Shonibare explained that, “In Nigeria I experienced a lot of colonial influence – things like going to Catholic school… learning British nursery rhymes, and so on… we all had to speak English at school – if you spoke a different language you’d get in trouble – so you learned how to operate between two cultures, really”. When he came to the U.K to study art, Yinka first experienced racism and discovered the complicated relationship that Britain had with its former colonies as well as the way that “people of African origin living in the West were having to find their own identities within these power relations and the inequalities of class”.

It was during his time at Goldsmiths College (1989-1991), the birthplace of the Young British Artists (YBA) movement in the late 1980s, with which he is often peripherally linked, that Shonibare became more seriously involved in feminist theory, literary theory, cultural criticism, and the works of philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Roland Barthes’ Mythologies (1957) was influential in that it introduced Shonibare to theories of semiology – the construction of signs and signifiers – particularly in the case of myth creation.

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13 Undressing Ethnicity, John Picton, 68
15 Ibid.
16 Hynes, Nancy. "Re-Dressing History." African Arts 34, no. 3, 60-73), 62
Through this exploration of critical theory Shonibare came to the conclusion that, “there is no such thing as a natural signifier… [It] is always constructed…what you represent things with is a form of mythology. Representation itself comes into question”.\(^{17}\) The question of representation and its authenticity is invariably linked with issues of identity.

Perhaps the most formative moment for Yinka Shonibare MBE as a young artist occurred when he was conceptualizing a series of works addressing the *perestroika* movement in the Soviet Union. One of his tutors at Goldsmiths expressed that he did not think the work reflected Yinka very much, telling him, “You’re African. Why aren’t you producing authentic African art”?\(^{18}\) Initially, Shonibare viewed questions of this nature as exclusionary and prejudicial as they contain a clear assumption that he needed to declare his ethnicity in order to make authentic art.\(^ {19}\)

Responding to these queries, Shonibare described how, “As an artist of African origin… there is an expectation that I am still connected to traditional African art, even though I am a twenty-first-century person and it would be rather odd to imagine that a French or English artist is remotely interested in medieval art”.\(^ {20}\) Instead of conceding to these seemingly fixed notions of what kind of artist he was meant to be by virtue of his ethnicity, Shonibare went on to challenge those implicit notions of authenticity and identity – to point out the signifiers and play with them with a sense of humor, to highlight the irrationality of those concepts of purity and call for a methodological approach of contamination instead.\(^ {21}\)

This concept of contamination – of the deconstruction of categories and the inherent problems of the signifier and signified structure detailed in the works of Barthes, Derrida and

\(^{17}\) Downey, "Artists in Conversation: Yinka Shonibare."
\(^{18}\) Goldstein, "Meet the Artist: Yinka Shonibare MBE on Art, Africa, and Why He's So Fond of the Queen".
\(^{19}\) Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation", 29
\(^{20}\) Kent, "Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE", 8
\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Foucault – gave Shonibare a framework with which to interpret his experiences as a self-proclaimed “post-colonial hybrid”. This acceptance and engagement with the idea of the hybrid nature of cultures, and of himself, leads back to Shonibare’s use of *The Tempest*, in which Caliban, with his physical disfigurement, can be seen as a hybrid figure. As quoted in “Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE”, Homi K. Bhaba argues that:

“The discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism... do not simply refer to a ‘person’… or to a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures. Produced through a strategy of disavowal, the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjugation: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not represented but repeated as something *different* – a mutation, a hybrid”.

In his work, the divergent signs that traditionally refer to colonizing powers, as well as colonized and post-colonized entities are destabilized – in some ways being turned into hybrids themselves – the pertinent groups united by the aesthetic excess that Shonibare utilizes to partially eliminate firmly held political boundaries. As Shonibare has voiced before, “Excess is the only legitimate means of subversion… Hybridization is a form of disobedience, a parasitic disobedience on the host of the species”.

The fiction of those signifiers – that they are constructed, not naturally occurring – is a profound belief for Shonibare, one that has led him to theatrical language and excess as a way to accentuate the sense of falsehood. For Shonibare, the theatricality that he expresses in his work is

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22 Hynes, ”Re-Dressing History”, 62
23 Kent, ”Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE”, 22
24 Ibid.
25 Hobbs, ”Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation”, 38
26 Ibid.
about “art as the construction of a fiction, art as the biggest lie”. In fact, he insists that to be a good artist, one must also be a good liar. Using theatricality as a device in his work, both in the aesthetics of the artwork and in the more nuanced conceptual references, not only sets the stage for the work, but it also gives a sense of the hyperreal, which allows Shonibare to create visions that do not actually exist in the world or events that may someday exist without supposing any obligation to truth. Along with the freedom from truth and the element of trickery or confusion that theatrical language and approaches brings to his work, there is also an element of the excess of the theater. While it may be initially subtle, as Shonibare explains, the notions of excess and frivolity do not exactly fit with common assumptions about Africa and African artists – thoughts of “poverty and political struggle” or “independence and civil rights” – which lends a sense of the unexpected. The unexpectedness of Shonibare’s work, from the sources, to the way it is presented, to the positions that he takes in alluding to both historical and contemporary events is an essential part of understanding the La Méduse pieces and The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters series.

The installation of Prospero’s Monsters opens with a glass case containing a room-sized multi-media model of a weather-beaten frigate captured as it “dangerously lists as if it is about to sink” (Fig. 1). Adjacent to La Méduse, the model ship in peril, is a large chromogenic print (C-print) bearing the same name as the multi-media piece and depicting the same model ship afloat in a turbulent sea (Fig. 2). While the shipwreck that sets the events of The Tempest in motion is

27 Downey, "Artists in Conversation: Yinka Shonibare."
28 Downey, Shonibare, "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey.", 46
29 Ibid.
never seen, here Shonibare gives a tangible, visual expression to the “tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard” that begins Shakespeare’s play. The theatricality of the La Méduse sculpture in particular is bolstered by its presence as both “a dramatic stage set and a two-dimensional image come to life”.

The historical event depicted in the La Méduse series is a familiar one in the cannon of Western art history, most famously portrayed in Théodore Géricault’s immense oil painting, The Raft of the Medusa (Le Radeau de la Méduse in its original French) completed between 1818 and 1819 (Fig 3.). One of, if not the first, Romantic painting to address a contemporary maritime tragedy, The Raft of the Medusa shows the aftermath of the ill-fated French frigate, Méduse, which was ran aground off of the coast of Senegal on the reef of Arguin in June of 1816. The expedition to Senegal was organized following the Congress of Vienna, which returned the colony to France after it had been taken by the Napoleonic Wars. The ultimate downfall of the Méduse, which was sent to deliver civil servants, military personnel, agriculturalists, settlers, and the new governor of Senegal, Col. Julien-Désiré Schmaltz, was that Capt. Hugues Duroys de Chaumareys was its operator. It was widely believed that de Chaumareys’ appointment was a remnant of the favoritism of the Restoration (Bourbon) government, as he had very little sailing experience before the expedition in 1816. When efforts to get the ship afloat failed and the captain decided to try to make it to the shore, it was determined that there was an insufficient amount of lifeboats in proportion to the passengers onboard. In an attempt to resolve the

31 Shakespeare, The Tempest, 1
32 “Yinka Shonibare MBE - Exhibitions - James Cohan Gallery.”
34 Boime, Albert. The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 50
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
problem, they constructed a raft to tow behind the lifeboats for the 152 remaining passengers, but after towing the raft for only a few hours de Chaumareys gave the order to cut the raft loose from the lifeboats. By the end of the twelve to seventeen days that the raft was stranded at sea, the effects of panic and hunger resulted in a dire number of survivors – only fifteen passengers were recovered alive, and five of them would perished shortly after being rescued.

In a dynamic pyramidal composition, Géricault’s astounding interpretation of the event shows the moment in which the survivors spot the boat that will be their salvation on the distant horizon, rather than Shonibare’s depiction of the ship prior to meeting its tragic end. Though they differed in the moment they chose to depict in their interpretation of the tale, Géricault also fabricated a model of the vessel that featured in his final, two-dimensional work. To capture a sense of reality, rather than the theatrical approach of Shonibare, Géricault not only interviewed survivors to recreate the raft, but he also spent time in the company of corpses to give a sense of realism to the passengers who did not survive the ordeal. Though he seemed to be striving for authenticity, in a purely subjective decision by the artist, the topmost figure of the human pyramid rising from the bodies of the dead and cannibalized, is a Black man, perhaps the Black soldier Jean Charles, waving a strip of fabric to signal their far-away rescuers. Though the critiques of governmental negligence, human sacrifice and needless suffering are perhaps the most immediately recognizable critiques given the account of the Méduse’s demise, if one digs a bit further there are also suggestions to the dark legacy of the slave-trade. Despite the fact that slavery had been outlawed by Napoleon during the Hundred Days, the new governor of Senegal, Schmaltz, had allowed the slave trade to resume in the colony. However, as the mid-nineteenth

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37 Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, 51
38 Ibid, 52
39 Ibid, 53
40 Gersh-Nesic, "Yinka Shonibare’s Age of Reason".
century critic Alfred Deberle wrote, on Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa there were, “… neither masters or slaves”.  

In addition to the mediums of the artworks, the reference to The Tempest, and the moment in the Méduse narrative that is depicted, there is one more significant difference between Gericault’s painting and Shonibare’s works – the striking “African” textiles used on the sails of the Méduse. Beginning in the early 1990s, the same “African” fabric, which is often referred to as African batik or Dutch Wax cloth, has been a consistent element in Shonibare’s work spanning all media (painting, photography, installation, sculpture, and film). Shonibare was drawn to this fabric during his time at Goldsmiths, when he was beginning to question what an “authentic African art” would look like for a middle-class Nigerian Londoner. The cloth is a fascinating manifestation of the complicated relationship between Africa and Europe, especially in terms of how they have in essence invented each other.  

The first incarnation of Dutch Wax cloth sold by the Dutch and the English was manufactured using a duplex roller system that printed hot resin instead of the traditional wax that was used in the Indonesian batik cloth which it was based upon. However, this manufactured cloth never had a market in its intended market of Indonesia due to the fact that the resin method used to make the cloths left “spots that continued to resist the additional colors…. [They] were not an exact fit but overlapped with adjacent parts of the design” – errors that did not occur using the traditional Indonesian process. However, the cloth found popularity in Africa and over time became a signifier of “authenticity” in Africa and for Africans in Britain.

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41 Boime, The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century 53
42 Hynes, "Re-Dressing History", 60
44 Ibid.
45 Downey, "Artists in Conversation: Yinka Shonibare."
Its impact even reached the United States where it has been adopted as “a declaration of African heritage or solidarity”. At its core a colonial invention, Dutch Wax fabric simultaneously highlights the notion of an “authentic” identity while exposing identity as a fabrication or construct. Essential to supporting the critique of “authentic” or innate identity and exposing the fabric’s fallacy as a signifier in Shonibare’s work is where he chooses to buy his fabric – the Brixton Market in the U.K. As Shonibare explains,

“When you realize they are designed and produced by people in Dutch and English factories, then that completely destroys the methodology of this seductive African thing. Therefore it is important I don’t go to Africa to buy them, so that all African exotic implications remain fake.”

The Dutch Wax fabric acts as one of the polarized signifiers that Shonibare manipulates to destabilize and synthesize seemingly or historically disparate groups in order to wrestle with the implications of cultural and national definitions in the contemporary context of globalization. The transcontinental history of the cloth not only endows it with a sense of uncertainty and hybridity that speaks to the interdependence of Africa and Britain (as well as all other socio-political entities in the world in general), but it also closely echoes Shonibare’s personal constructed hybrid identity.

Of the pieces discussed, the five photographs in *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* series, found in the third and final gallery of the *Prospero’s Monster’s* show, is perhaps the most visually linked to motifs of personal identity, as each of the five prints features a real person.

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46 Dolkart, *Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders*, 28
47 Downey, “Artists in Conversation: Yinka Shonibare.”
48 Kent, “Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE”, 7
50 Kent, “Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE”, 7
Instead of reinterpreting, as is the case of the La Méduse pieces in the opening gallery, here Shonibare re-enacts a moment in Western art history – Francisco Goya y Luciente’s renowned work, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, the 43rd etching in his suite of satires, *Los Caprichos*, (1797-1799) (Fig. 4).\(^{51}\) In the original etching, a billowing assortment of ghastly creatures swarms about a sleeping figure.\(^{52}\) The inscription on the desk where the figure – the author “asleep” – rests his head contextualizes the fantastical and theatrical scene, declaring “the sleep of reason produces monsters”. Seen through the lens of this proclamation, the menacing assemblage of owls, bats, a black cat and a lynx – animals often associated with “evil, ignorance and folly” – exemplify the irrational nocturnal terrors looming over the slumbering man.\(^{53}\)

In its conceptualization, *Los Caprichos*, the collection of etchings for which *The Sleep of Reason* was meant to be the frontispiece, is directly connected to the Enlightenment, the historical period of “reason” and “rationality” that Shonibare focuses his criticism throughout the *Prospero’s Monster’s* exhibition. Although it was a fairly fluid intellectual movement, as a whole, the Enlightenment, which spanned the 17th and 18th centuries, was a period that can be characterized by the emergence of “new rationalism and an insatiable quest for the acquisition of knowledge”.\(^{54}\) The focus of this era – ideas intended to improve the human experience through advocating or theorizing new forms of government, commerce, and education – spread rapidly throughout all of Europe, including Goya’s native Spain.\(^{55}\) As a Spanish court painter in the mid-to-late 1700s, Goya operated within sophisticated circles of poets, artists, and intellectuals who wholeheartedly embraced the liberal ideologies of the Enlightenment.\(^{56}\) However, he did not just

\(^{51}\) Gersh-Nesic, "Yinka Shonibare's Age of Reason".

\(^{52}\) Kent, "Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE", 20

\(^{53}\) Dolkart, *Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders*, 68

\(^{54}\) Ibid, 64

\(^{55}\) Ibid.

\(^{56}\) Dolkart, *Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders*, 68
paint the prosperous middle class or the theatrical glamour of the bullfighters, he also turned to themes of war and the gallows. Not dissimilar to Shonibare, Goya was simultaneously attracted to aesthetic beauty and the more uncomfortable and harsh subjects that exist in every society.

Published in full in 1799, the release of *Los Caprichos* coincided with the end of the Age of Reason. While the publishing date may not have been a deliberate decision for Goya, in hindsight, it is quite profound. Goya was an artist who was fully aware of the contradictions of his era – claims of rationality versus irrationality, ideas for the betterment of the human condition versus the destructive accumulation of power and territorial expansion – and there at the end of the Enlightenment’s era, he boldly satirized the numerous ills of society – the “monsters of the dark night in which his country was enveloped”. Like Shonibare’s continued commitment to addressing the themes of colonialism, imperialism, and the power of the establishment despite his status as an MBE, Goya had the courage to pass critical judgment on both his patrons and employers, even as he remained in their service. Perhaps another point of connection for Shonibare, *Los Caprichos* was created after a long period of convalescence following a debilitating illness that left Goya deaf for the rest of his life. Comparatively, when Shonibare was in his first year of art school in 1981, he developed transverse myelitis, a rare inflammatory disease that causes permanent damage to the spinal cord resulting in varying degrees of weakness, sensory alterations and loss of spinal cord function for variable intervals of time.

During his initial outbreak Shonibare was left paralyzed for a month, hospitalized for a year and

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57 Dolkart, *Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders*, 68
59 Ibid.
subsequently spent three years wheelchair-bound. Eventually he was able to walk once again, but
his overall mobility – most particularly the use of his left side – has remained impaired.  

Returning to Shonibare’s contemporary *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, each of
the five large-scale chromogenic prints replicates the formal composition of the original etching
with a distinct attention to detail (Fig 5 – Fig 9). However, the approach of faithful reenactment
is not ubiquitous. The first deviation occurs in the text that so prominently features on the desk
where a figure sleeps. Shonibare’s prints restage Goya’s etching with a focus five continents –
Europe, Africa, America, Asia, and Australia. In each print he has altered the original text,
adding a question mark and transforming it into a rhetorical question asking, “The sleep of
reason produces monsters in America?” and so on. He has also replaced the original Spanish
with French, referencing the “arrogance of liberal democracy [that] has led to the most irrational
acts of genocide”, which after all, originated in France during the Enlightenment.

Shonibare’s second significant site of transformation occurs within his treatment of the
slumbering figures, which he has chosen to clothe in the Dutch Wax cloth that has become
almost a signature of his work. The cloth not only adds a layer of meaningful cultural critique by
recalling the complexities of cultural identity and authenticity that have been previously
discussed, but the unexpectedness of these figures dressed in Victorian clothing made out of the
unlikely material of African batik adds to a sense of theatricality or falsehood that Shonibare so
values in his work. It also echoes the call for balance between rationality/irrationality and
fantasy/reality, that is expressed by Goya in the full subtitle of the work which reads, “Fantasy
abandoned by reason begets impossible monsters; united with it, it is the mother of the arts and

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61 Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation", 29
62 Downey, Shonibare, "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey.", 49
the origin of their marvels”.

Shonibare has also toyed with the ethnicities of the models representing the slumbering man. Rather than playing into the assumption that a black man would represent Africa, we see the image of an old white man; a black man represents Asia. In his conversation with Anthony Downey, Shonibare asserted that, “…irrational aggression, born out of a form of Enlightenment rational reasoning, toward a race you do not understand produces a sleep of “reason” out of which comes monsters… enlightened intentions… do not necessarily produce enlightened results”.

The historical trope of the supposedly Enlightened European attempting to civilize the “other” is a problem that Shonibare insists is still relevant today. When the “other”, like Caliban in The Tempest, refuses to be enlightened, democracy is forced upon them with violence – it is justification for war, such as in Iraq.

Throughout the Prospero’s Monsters exhibition, from the title to the intricate and nuanced layers of meaning in the La Méduse works and The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters series, the utilization of references to iconic images in Western art appropriates a degree of the power that the images possess, allowing Shonibare to use the “iconography of power to deconstruct power itself”.

Essentially, his critiques of these artworks act as a mechanism by which he can insert himself into that historical narrative, creating a place for himself within art history. From this insider position as a part of the historical construct, Shonibare’s use of Dutch Wax fabric emphasizes the “artifice of history”, showing that the Eurocentric narrative of the colonial era relied on “a projection of Africa as unreal and inauthentic as [the] supposedly

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63 Micko, Samsour. Francisco Goya Y Lucientes, Caprichos, 37
64 Downey, Shonibare, "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey.", 49
65 Ibid.
66 Downey, Shonibare, "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey.", 45
“authentic” African fabrics”. 68 The beautiful form that the artworks display is seductive, grabbing the viewer’s attention before confronting them with aforementioned unsettling truths about society – both then and now. Echoing his own position as a Nigerian Londoner, the synthesis of Western and European references results in an exhibition that casts hybridization in a leading role. Filtered through a lens of theatricality, the fallacy of Shonibare’s work transcends the constructed boundaries of identity, whether cultural or ethnic, societal or personal, presenting “alternative realities” or “fantasies of empowerment” that give him the power to shape reality to his will, rather than repeat its constraints. 69

69 Stilling, Robert. "An Image of Europe: Yinka Shonibare’s Postcolonial Decadence”, 304
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Illustrations

Fig. 1: Yinka Shonibare, La Méduse, 2008, mixed media

Fig. 2: Yinka Shonibare, La Méduse, 2008, chromogenic print
Fig 3: Théodore Géricault, The Raft of the Medusa, 1719
Fig 4: Goya, The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, 1799

Fig 5: Shonibare, The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America), 2008, C-Print
Fig. 6: The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Asia), 2008, C-Print

Fig 7: The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Africa), 2008, C-Print
Fig. 8: The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Europe), 2008, C-Print

Fig. 9: The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Australia), 2008, C-Print
Les songes de la raison produisent-ils des monstres en Australie?