

Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)



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Bringing together photographs, costumes, sculpture, and film, this display of works by Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA) (b. 1962) shows the breadth of his art while focusing on a single theme: the life, death, and legacy of Admiral Lord Nelson, whom Shonibare takes as an emblem of Britain's imperial past. Each of the works here incorporates or makes reference to the colorful, Dutch wax-printed fabrics that have become Shonibare's signature material. Associated with Africa but originating in Indonesia and Holland, these fabrics are the product of global trade and point to key themes at the heart of this artist's work.

Shonibare's interest in Nelson began when he was commissioned to make a sculpture for Trafalgar Square, London's preeminent public space, which commemorates Nelson's triumph and death at the Battle of Trafalgar. Shonibare's response was to make *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, which reduces Nelson's flagship HMS *Victory* to a toy-like replica fitted with ironically cheerful Dutch wax cotton sails and sealed within

a giant glass bottle. In Shonibare's subsequent characterizations of Nelson and his estranged wife, Frances Nisbet, the same printed fabric reappears in clothing cut to period styles. These modified reproductions of Nelson's uniform and Fanny's dress are presented in glass cases like artifacts, their historic associations interwoven with their own function as costumes for Shonibare's film *Addio del Passato* and his photographic tableaux, the *Fake Death Pictures*.

The Center's collections provide a rich context for considering the political and cultural resonances of Shonibare's work. The commemoration of Trafalgar and Nelson were major themes for British painters, as can be seen in the collection displays on the fourth floor, and in the special exhibition *Spreading Canvas: Eighteenth-Century British Marine Painting*, on view on the third floor from September 15 to December 4. The display also coincides with the installation of Malcolm Morley's *Trafalgar-Waterloo* (2013), and of works on paper by Black British and African American contemporary artists (selected by the Center's Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings, Gillian Forrester), on view nearby

on the second floor. Shonibare's *Fake Death Picture (The Death of Chatterton—Henry Wallis)*, recently acquired by the Center, relates to an oil-on-panel study by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Henry Wallis, which is on view on the far side of the second floor.

Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA) has been curated by Martina Droth, Deputy Director of Research and Curator of Sculpture, Yale Center for British Art. This display will be on view through December 11, 2016.

Self-Portrait (After Warhol) 2 2013

Born in London in 1962 to Nigerian parents, Shonibare spent his childhood in Lagos but frequently returned to London. His experience and understanding of two cultures that are often thought of as alien to each other underpins his work. This powerful and provocative self-portrait takes its cue from Andy Warhol's famous *Camouflage Self-Portrait*, made just months before the artist's



Andy Warhol, *Camouflage Self-Portrait*, 1986, synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, © Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Self-Portrait (After Warhol) 2*, 2013, unique screen print, digital print, and hand-painted linen
Collection of John and Amy Phelan, © Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)

death in 1986. Inserting himself in place of the American pop icon, Shonibare plays with the hide-and-seek concept of camouflage to raise questions about “ethnicity” and authentic cultural identity. With his dreadlocks extended dynamically like Warhol’s spiked wig, and a batik-patterned cloth substituting the US military camouflage pattern, Shonibare both embraces and parodies the familiar language of the self-portrait.

Nelson’s Ship in a Bottle (Maquette) 2007

This maquette relates to Shonibare’s first public sculpture, commissioned for the “Fourth Plinth” in Trafalgar Square, London, and now in the collection of the National Maritime Museum, London. Since 1999, this empty plinth has provided a site for contemporary art commissions. Trafalgar Square was built in the Victorian period to commemorate Admiral Nelson’s victory and death at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, thereby serving as a public



Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle (Maquette)*, 2007, plastic, Dutch wax-printed cotton textile, cork, acrylic, and glass bottle, courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, © Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)



Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* from the Fourth Plinth Commission in Trafalgar Square, 2010, fiberglass, steel, brass, resin, UV ink on printed cotton textile, linen rigging, acrylic, and wood, courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, © Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)

symbol of Britain's imperial prowess. Today, it is also London's most important civic space for public gatherings and political demonstrations. *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* captures in a giant glass bottle a replica of Nelson's flagship HMS *Victory*, its sails made of Shonibare's signature Dutch wax-printed fabrics. Reducing this heroic object into something toy-like has the effect, as the artist has said, that it becomes "disarmed" and "is no longer an instrument of colonial expansion."

Nelson's Jacket / Fanny's Dress 2011

These works are characteristic of Shonibare's interest in historic fashions and uniforms associated with the aristocracy and the long eighteenth century. Familiar styles are meticulously tailored with Dutch wax-printed cottons. At least three different fabrics are used for Nelson's jacket, and no fewer than six for Fanny's dress, their patterns carefully aligned to the folds and cuts of the clothing. While standing in for historical characters, Shonibare's clothed, headless dummies are also representative of the larger culture associated with Britain's imperial past. The costumes were used for Shonibare's film *Addio del Passato* (2011) and his series of *Fake Death Pictures*, three of which are displayed here.

Following spread Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Nelson's Jacket*, 2011, Dutch wax-printed cotton textile, fiberglass mannequin, and wood and glass vitrine, courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York, © Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)

Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Fanny's Dress*, 2011, Dutch wax-printed cotton textile, fiberglass mannequin, and wood and glass vitrine, courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York, © Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)



Fake Death Picture (The Death of Chatterton— Henry Wallis)

2011

These *Fake Death Pictures* (from a series of five) consist of tableaux that recreate nineteenth-century paintings of suicides. The same actor appears in each work, dressed in Nelson's uniform, his powdered wig and face linking him with the fashions of the long eighteenth century. Each work reimagines a different death scenario for Nelson, transforming the noble sacrifice of the imperial hero into a lonely, undignified suicide. Nelson is both historically specific and a symbol.



The contrast between his beautiful clothing and the neglected surroundings suggests the death of a man, and of the class and culture he embodies. There is a mixture of exacting reconstruction and improvisation. In this work, the shape of the alcove and window carefully replicate those in the painting—down to the number of glass panes, the angle at which the window is opened, and the potted plant with a single pink blossom on the sill. But Shonibare replaces Wallis's flowerpot with a mass-produced variety familiar to twenty-first-century viewers, and the empty glass vial in the foreground with a modern plastic version. This work was purchased by the Center in 2016. Wallis's original oil-on-panel study (ca. 1856) can be viewed on the other side of this floor. The final painting is in the collection of the Tate Gallery, London.

Left Henry Wallis, *The Death of Chatterton*, ca. 1856, oil on panel
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Following spread Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Fake Death Picture (The Death of Chatterton—Henry Wallis)*, 2011, digital chromogenic print, Yale Center for British Art, Lee McCormick Edwards Foundation and Friends of British Art Fund, © Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)



Fake Death Picture (The Suicide—Manet)

2011

This work is based on Edouard Manet's *Le Suicidé* (ca. 1877), a small and surprisingly little-studied oil painting. As in Manet's painting, Shonibare's tableau shows a man slumped back on a bed in a sparse room, apparently dead, but still grasping the gun that alludes to the suicide of the title. A bloodstain on his clothing seems to confirm his death, but its neatness further underscores the artifice of the scene.



Édouard Manet, *Le Suicidé*, ca. 1877, oil on canvas
Foundation E.G. Bührle, Zurich



Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Fake Death Picture (The Suicide—Manet)*, 2011,
digital chromogenic print, courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York,
© Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)

Fake Death Picture (The Suicide— Leonardo Alenza) 2011

Unlike the other *Fake Death Pictures*, this work evokes a stage set for a play or opera, with the background provided by a scene painting rather than an actual landscape. In the original painting, of course, everything is painted. The artificiality of the scene heightens the sense of melodrama. Shonibare has made a double parody: Leonardo Alenza's painting—titled *Satire of the Romantic Suicide* (ca. 1839)—is itself a parody of artistic depictions of death.



Leonardo Alenza, *Satire of the Romantic Suicide*, ca. 1839, oil on canvas, Museo del Romanticismo, Madrid, Spain / Bridgeman Images



Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA), *Fake Death Picture (The Suicide—Leonardo Alenza)*, 2011, digital chromogenic print, collection of Ruth and Bil Ehrlich, © Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)

List of Works

Self-Portrait (After Warhol) 2
2013

Unique screen print, digital print,
and hand-painted linen
53 x 52½ x 2¼ inches
(134.5 x 134 x 5.5 cm)
Collection of John and Amy Phelan

Nelson's Ship in a Bottle (Maquette)
2007

Plastic, Dutch wax-printed
cotton textile, cork, acrylic,
and glass bottle
Overall: 32¾ x 23½ x 15 inches
(83.2 x 59.7 x 38.1 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and James
Cohan Gallery, New York, and
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Nelson's Jacket

2011
Dutch wax-printed cotton textile,
fiberglass mannequin, and wood
and glass vitrine
81¾ x 36 x 36 inches
(207.6 x 91.4 x 91.4 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan Gallery, New York

Fanny's Dress

2011
Dutch wax-printed cotton textile,
fiberglass mannequin, and wood
and glass vitrine
81¾ x 36 x 36 inches
(207.6 x 91.4 x 91.4 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan Gallery, New York

Fake Death Picture
(*The Death of Chatterton—*
Henry Wallis)

2011, no. 1 in an edition of 5
Digital chromogenic print
Framed: 58½ x 71¼ x 1½ inches
(148.9 x 180.9 x 4.1 cm)
Yale Center for British Art, Lee
MacCormick Edwards Foundation
and Friends of British Art Fund

Fake Death Picture
(*The Suicide—Manet*)

2011, no. 1 in an edition of 5
Digital chromogenic print
Framed: 58½ x 71¼ x 1½ inches
(148.6 x 180.6 x 4.1 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and
James Cohan Gallery, New York

Fake Death Picture
(*The Suicide—Leonardo Alenza*)

2011, no. 1 in an edition of 5
Digital chromogenic print
Framed: 76¾ x 58¾ x 1½ inches
(194 x 148.9 x 4.1 cm)
Collection of Ruth and Bil Ehrlich

Related Programs

Three films by Yinka Shonibare
MBE (RA) will be screened in the
Center's Lecture Hall this fall:

*Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked
Ball)* (2004), Shonibare's first
film, takes as its theme the
assassination of King Gustav III of
Sweden in 1792 at a masked ball.
Odile and Odette (2005), a silent
ballet inspired by Tchaikovsky's
Swan Lake, juxtaposes the move-
ments of two dancers—one
white-skinned, the other black—in
an invisible mirror. *Addio del
Passato* (2011) extends the artist's
exploration of the life of Admiral
Lord Nelson by reimagining Verdi's
La Traviata as an opera sung by
Nelson's estranged wife, Fanny.
Featuring performers dressed in
Shonibare's recognizable Dutch
wax-printed cottons, these three
works link the artist's interest
in costume, masquerade, and
performance through the medium
of film.

Together the films run approxi-
mately sixty-four minutes. The
films will be shown on **Tuesdays**
from 2:30 to 4:30 pm; Fridays from
11 am to 1 pm; and on the following
Saturdays from 11:30 am to 1:30 pm:
September 17 and 24; October 1
and 29. They will also be shown on
October 25, from 6:30 to 7:30 pm.

Please visit our online calendar
for additional information and
screening times.

Andrew Carnduff Ritchie Lecture
A Conversation with
Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA)

Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA) with
Kobena Mercer, Professor of
the History of Art and African
American Studies, Yale University

Tuesday, October 25, 5:30 pm
Yale University Art Gallery
1111 Chapel Street,
New Haven, Connecticut

Reception and viewing of the
installation immediately
following the conversation
Yale Center for British Art
1080 Chapel Street,
New Haven, Connecticut

cover

Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA),
Nelson's Ship in a Bottle from
the Fourth Plinth Commission
in Trafalgar Square, 2010, fiber-
glass, steel, brass, resin, UV ink
on printed cotton textile, linen
rigging, acrylic, and wood,
Collection of the National
Maritime Museum, London,
© Getty Images/Dan Kitwood

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