

## Foreword

By Nadja Swarovski

The Swarovski Foundation is delighted to join the Whitechapel Gallery in honouring Yinka Shonibare with the 2021 Art Icon Award.

Shonibare's work is exuberant, bold and strikingly beautiful and his subject matter is wide ranging and international. But while the artist's tableaux explore issues such as race, colonialism and identity, they are never po-faced. Instead they are riotously colourful and often wickedly funny.

His theatrical body of work encompasses sculpture, painting, photography, film, tapestries and public works – and regardless of medium, his art exerts an emotional punch.

The common thread in Shonibare's powerful visual storytelling is his desire to challenge assumptions and stereotypes, and this impulse is reflected in his philanthropic programmes.

As founder of the Yinka Shonibare Foundation, he has sought to promote artistic and cultural exchange between Africa and the rest of the world, and his pioneering Guest Projects initiative in East London has offered free studio space to emerging and established artists of every stripe for many years.

We commend Shonibare for his generosity of spirit and his dedication to supporting younger generations of artists, a mission that the Swarovski Foundation shares in its commitment to nurturing creative talent through scholarships at leading design schools and its partnerships with cultural institutions such as the Whitechapel Gallery.

Our warmest congratulations go to Yinka Shonibare, a brilliant and inspiring Art Icon for our times and a humanitarian who believes in the power of art to transform people's lives. His artistic and philanthropic legacy will endure for years to come.

## Yinka Shonibare CBE RA Art Icon 2021

By Iwona Blazwick OBE

In 2010 a strange craft landed in London's Trafalgar Square. It was a gigantic, corked bottle that lay on its side atop a monumental stone plinth, like a message from a desert island. The vessel's huge scale—it measured 4.7 meters in length—and its unlikely location were made all the more uncanny by its contents: a fully rigged ship. The creator of this astonishing work was Yinka Shonibare. He had performed, on a monumental scale, the sailor's famous trick of slipping a ship into a bottle. The boat is a shrunken replica of HMS Victory, the ship that, in 1805, defeated Napoleon in the Battle of Trafalgar. It was captained by Admiral Nelson, immortalised on top of the column at the centre of Trafalgar Square. The galleon's sails billow with the vivid colours and graphic patterns of African textiles, a signature of Shonibare's work. For his remarkable commission for the Fourth Plinth, the artist commented:

'Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar freed up the seas for Britain, meaning that the Empire could expand without Napoleon standing in the way. So on the one hand, it's a warship with a violent, aggressive legacy that destroyed a number of cultures along the way. But then, ironically, this nationalistic drive to preserve and expand overseas has actually ended up diluting the Empire. In a way, we owe the exciting diversity of the multicultural London we now have to the legacy of Nelson and indirectly to the Empire.'

Many of Shonibare's sculptures and installations float or fly. In Documenta 11, the important global art survey staged in Germany every 5 years, he levitated a horse carriage above five couples. They were dressed in 18th century costume and locked in sexual congress. In his rococo masterpiece, *The Swing (after Fragonard)* (2001) he brings into three dimensions Fragonard's 1767 painting of a be-frilled young lady who swings up into the air, giving her lover a glimpse of her pantaloons. In each case the exhilaration, freedom and adventure of flight is countered by an Icarus-like fall. The flying carriage and copulating figures of *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002) refer to the 18th century Grand Tours of Europe embarked on by youthful aristocrats for their aesthetic education. Their adventures were notoriously licentious and rapacious – antiquities would be snapped up for the youths to export back to their country houses. In Shonibare's iteration of Fragonard's aristocratic young lady, she is headless. Could this be an intimation of the death by guillotine that was to be the fate of her class just two decades after the original was painted?

For his 2012 exhibition at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park Shonibare suspended flying machines and 'alien' astronauts above the heads of the viewers. This preoccupation with flight tells us something about his origins. Born in London in 1962, he moved to his family's native Nigeria in 1965, returning to study in London in the 1980s. Shonibare knows what it is to be a voyager and a stranger, to float through time and outside culture. And in his earliest works the artist himself makes an appearance, as flâneur and dandy.

Shonibare studied at Goldsmiths College, which in the 1980s had moved away from medium based teaching to an interdisciplinary model where students could pick up a paintbrush, a chisel or a camera. Shonibare duly emerged with a brilliant facility for photography, film, sculpture, printmaking, painting and performance. He quickly came to prominence with a series of photographic tableaux inspired by William Hogarth's 'Rake's Progress'. *The Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) comprises impeccably staged mise-en-scenes cast and costumed as Victorian drama. The central performer is the artist himself, embarking on the downward slope from wealth, via debauchery and excess, to ruin. His first film, *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)* of 2004, features masked dancers in powdered wigs, ball gowns and frock coats twirling across the wooden parquet of an elegant Swedish palace. Inspired by Verdi's 1859 opera about the assassination of the Swedish

King Gustav III, the entertainment is interrupted by a beautiful intruder who slowly approaches then shoots the king. Just as the dancers whirl around so the film itself is looped; the king falls to his death and then rises once again.

Why is a contemporary artist so drawn to the costumes, interiors and narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries? Shonibare came of age with the emergence of postmodernism, when history and its silences offered itself as subject. This historical turn proved urgent to those artists who found their cultures and identities to be historically invisible.

Another clue he offers is in his use of titles that the Queen has bestowed on him. Shonibare has been promoted recently by Queen Elizabeth II from MBE, Member of the British Empire, to CBE, Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. He has incorporated the titles into his signature in a sardonic gesture that is part appreciative, part ironic. Britain's colonial power expanded through the 18th and 19th centuries until it became the largest empire in history. Wikipedia notes that 'Between 1815 and 1914... around 26 million square kilometres of territory and roughly 40 million people were added to the British Empire'. These included the central and western regions of the African continent from which Britain extracted raw materials and people – 3.5 million Africans were seized and deported into slavery in the Americas. Nigeria itself was under British rule from 1800 until 1960.

Yinka is an honorary commander of this now phantom empire and his work tracks the complexities and ambiguities of its globalising legacy, a legacy that wove together British and African cultures. Many of Shonibare's figures sport globes instead of heads. They not only symbolise the compulsion to map and conquer – their heads are also literally spinning, adding to his sculpture's great dynamism.

The artist's fascination with this period must also be aesthetic. His signature material is the Indonesian batik textile that was expropriated by the Dutch East India colonisers for mass production and sale to Africa. These fabrics' chromatic range and bold floral or geometric patterns were embraced by the African people – perhaps in rejection of the sombre, authoritarian uniforms of its colonisers. These fabrics transcend the artificial national borders imposed by European colonisers. They have been the basis of the flags that Shonibare has installed as public sculptures in Europe and America.

Their chromatic range, complementary colours and ornamental brilliance also gives his work its painterly verve. By decking out his 18th and 19th century protagonists in the vivid palette of these textiles, Shonibare not only takes back history but also dazzles his audiences. He is perhaps also truly a dandy, who cannot resist the dashing cut of a fine frock coat, the flourish of a bustle and the eros of the corset.

The Art Icon Award recognises an artistic practice of great cultural significance. In 2021 the award is also given in recognition of the artist's tremendous contribution to younger generations of artists. His Guest Projects initiative has welcomed proposals for shows that are dropped into his Hackney studio letterbox. In London he offers his studio as a curatorial laboratory for emerging artists. He has established Guest Artist Space (G.A.S.) in Nigeria, for which he has built a beautiful new facility in Lagos. This studio residency offers the chance for artists from the UK to live and work alongside their African peers for mutual inspiration. And challenging the monopoly that cities have as crucibles of creativity, G.A.S. will have a second site in a rural district outside Lagos, Ijebu, to bring together art, design, architecture and agriculture. The artist is redefining a relationship between Britain and Nigeria that was once based on domination and extraction with one that inspires a reciprocal flow of creativity.

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# Biography

#### Yinka Shonibare CBE (b. 1962, London)

(b. 1962, London) Lives and works in London

Over the past three decades, Yinka Shonibare has made sculptures, films, installations, tapestries, painting and public artworks that encourage viewers to think deeply about historical narratives, power, race, colonialism and identity construction. Often incorporating references from Western art history and literature his work questions the validity of contemporary cultural and national identities within the context of globalisation. His signature material is the vibrantly coloured 'Dutch wax' batik fabric. Batik was inspired by Indonesian designs, manufactured in Holland and then sold to colonies in West Africa before becoming a signifier for African identity in the 1960s.

Shonibare has supported a younger generation of artists through his pioneering 'Guest Projects', an initiative that gives free studio space in London to practitioners of any discipline for a month. He is the founder of the Yinka Shonibare Foundation, which aims to promote artistic and cultural exchange between Africa and the rest of the world through an ambitious programme of artist residencies in Nigeria from 2021.

The American Library, 2018 (detail),

Cleveland Public Library,

14 July - 30 September 2018,

dimensions variable, hardback books, Dutch wax printed cotton

textile, gold foiled names and

website

#### Selected public sculpture

Material (SG) II, 360 Rosemary, West Palm Beach, Florida, 2021 Material (SG) I, Whitman Walker Health Centre Commission,

Washington D.C, 2019
Wind Sculpture (SG) V, The
Greenway Public Park, Boston,
Massachusetts. 2020–21

Wind Sculpture (SG) IV, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey,

Wind Sculpture (SG) I, Public Art Fund Commission, Doris C. Freedman Plaza, Central Park, New York; installed permanently at Davidson College, North Carolina, 2018

Wind Sculpture VI, Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy Burlington Gardens, London, England, 2017

Wind Sculpture VII, Smithsonian Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., 2016

Wind Sculpture VI, British Council UK/Nigeria 2015–16, Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Lagos, Nigeria, 2016

Wind Sculpture, Howick Place, Victoria, London, England, 2014 Wind Sculpture V, Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden, New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2014

Globe Head Ballerina, Royal Opera House, London, England, 2012

Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, Fourth Plinth Commission, 2010–12, Trafalgar Square, London, England, installed permanently at National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, England

## Selected solo exhibitions

#### 2021

End of Empire, Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria

Radical Hybridity, M WOODS Art Community, Beijing, China Justice for All, The Arts House, Singapore

Yinka Shonibare CBE: Flower Power, Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan

Trade Winds, Norval Foundation, Cape Town, South Africa 2018

The American Library, Van Every/ Smith Galleries at Davidson College, North Carolina

Ruins Decorated, Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa Yinka Shonibare MBE, Busan Museum of Art, South Korea

#### 2017

Prejudice at Home: A Parlour, A Library, and A Room, James Cohan Gallery, New York 2016

End of Empire, Turner Contemporary, Margate, England

RA Family Album, Royal Academy of Arts, London, England

Yinka Shonibare MBE, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut 2015

Rage of the Ballet Gods, James

Cohan Gallery, New York Yinka Shonibare MBE - The William Morris Family Album, William Morris Gallery, London, England 2014

Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

MCA Chicago Plaza Project: Yinka
Shonibare MBE, Museum of
Contemporary Art Chicago, Illinois

Party Time: Re-imagine America, The Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey 2013–2014

Yinka Shonibare MBE, Royal Museums Greenwich, London, England 2013

FABRIC-ATION, GL Strand, Copenhagen, Denmark and Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, England

FOCUS: Yinka Shonibare, MBE, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas

Imagined as the Truth, San Diego Art Museum, San Diego, California

El Futuro del Pasado, Alcalá 31 Centros de Arte, Madrid, Spain, curated by Octavio Zaya; toured to Centro de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain 2010–2011

Human Culture: Earth, Wind, Fire and Water, Israel Museum, Jerusalem Looking Up, Nouveau Musée

National de Monaco, Monaco 2009–2010 Mother and Father Worked Hard So I

Can Play, Brooklyn Museum, New York; toured to the Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri 2009

A Flying Machine for every Man, Woman and Child, Miami Art Museum, Miami

Yinka Shonibare, MBE, Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney, Australia; Brooklyn Museum, New York; National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C

#### 2008

Odile and Odette, Savannah College of Art and Design, ACA Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia 2007

Scratch the Surface, National Gallery, London, England

Jardin d'Amour, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France 2004

Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London, England

Double Dutch, Boijmans van
Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam,
The Netherlands; toured to
Kunsthalle Vienna, Austria
2003

Play with me, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, England 2002–2003

Double Dress, Israel Museum,
Jerusalem; toured to KIASMA,
Helsinki, Finland; Studio Museum,
Harlem, New York and Padiglione
d'Arte Contemporanea, Milan, Italy
2002

Be-muse, The British School in Rome, Rome, Italy 2000

Affectionate Men, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England

Diary of a Victorian Dandy Project, INIVA; toured to Castle Museum, Nottingham; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle; Towner Art Gallery, Eastbourne, England

Dressing Down, Ikon Gallery,
Birmingham; toured to Henie
Onstad Art Centre, Norway;
Northern Gallery for Contemporary
Art, Sunderland; Mappin Art
Gallery, Sheffield; Oriel Mostyn,
Llandudno, Wales

Alien Obsessives, Mum, Dad and

the Kids, Tablet, the Tabernacle, London; toured to Norwich Art Gallery, Norwich, England 1997

Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, England

Present Tense, contemporary project series, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Canada

### Selected Curated Exhibitions

## 2018-2020

Criminal Ornamentation, Arts Council
Collection, Attenborough Arts
Centre, Leicester; touring to Royal
Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter;
Longside Gallery, Wakefield;
Southampton City Art Gallery,
Southampton, England
2018

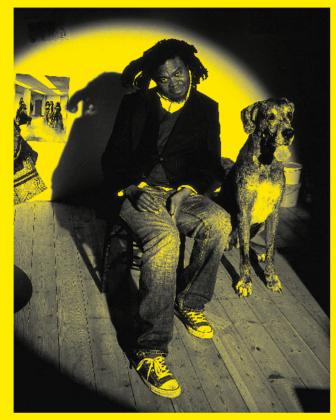
Talisman in the Age of Difference, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, England





### Caption List

- 1 Nelson's Ship in a Bottle maquette in progress, 2009 Photographer unknown
- 2 'The Artist's Dining Room', Hilma Af Klint Supper Club, 2019, Courtesy Guest Projects
- 3 'The Artist's Dining Room', The Futurist Supper Club, 2018, Courtesy Guest Projects
- 4 Shonibare Studio, 2016 Photo: Wig Worland
- 5 Shonibare Studio, 2016 Photo: Wig Worland
- 6 Shonibare Studio, 2016 Photo: Wig Worland
- 7 Yinka Shonibare CBE, 1989 Photo: Edward Woodman
- 8 Yinka Shonibare CBE, 2009 Photo: Shane Deegan
- 9 FABRIC-ATION Exhibition Preview, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2012 Photographer unknown
- 10 Wind Sculpture (SG) I in progress, 2017 Photo: Jonathan Bassett
- 11 Yinka receiving his CBE, 2019 Photo: Rachel Sorrill
- 12 Ecology Green Farm, Ijebu, Nigeria, 2019 Courtesy The Yinka Shonibare Foundation
- 13 G.A.S. Foundation, 2019 Courtesy The Yinka Shonibare Foundation
- 14 Guest Artists Space (G.A.S.)
  Foundation, Lagos, Nigeria. Papa
  Omotayo Architects MOE + Art.
  Courtesy The Yinka Shonibare
  Foundation
- 15 Guest Artists Space (G.A.S.)
  Foundation, Lagos, Nigeria
  Elsie Owusu Architects
  Courtesy The Yinka Shonibare
  Foundation



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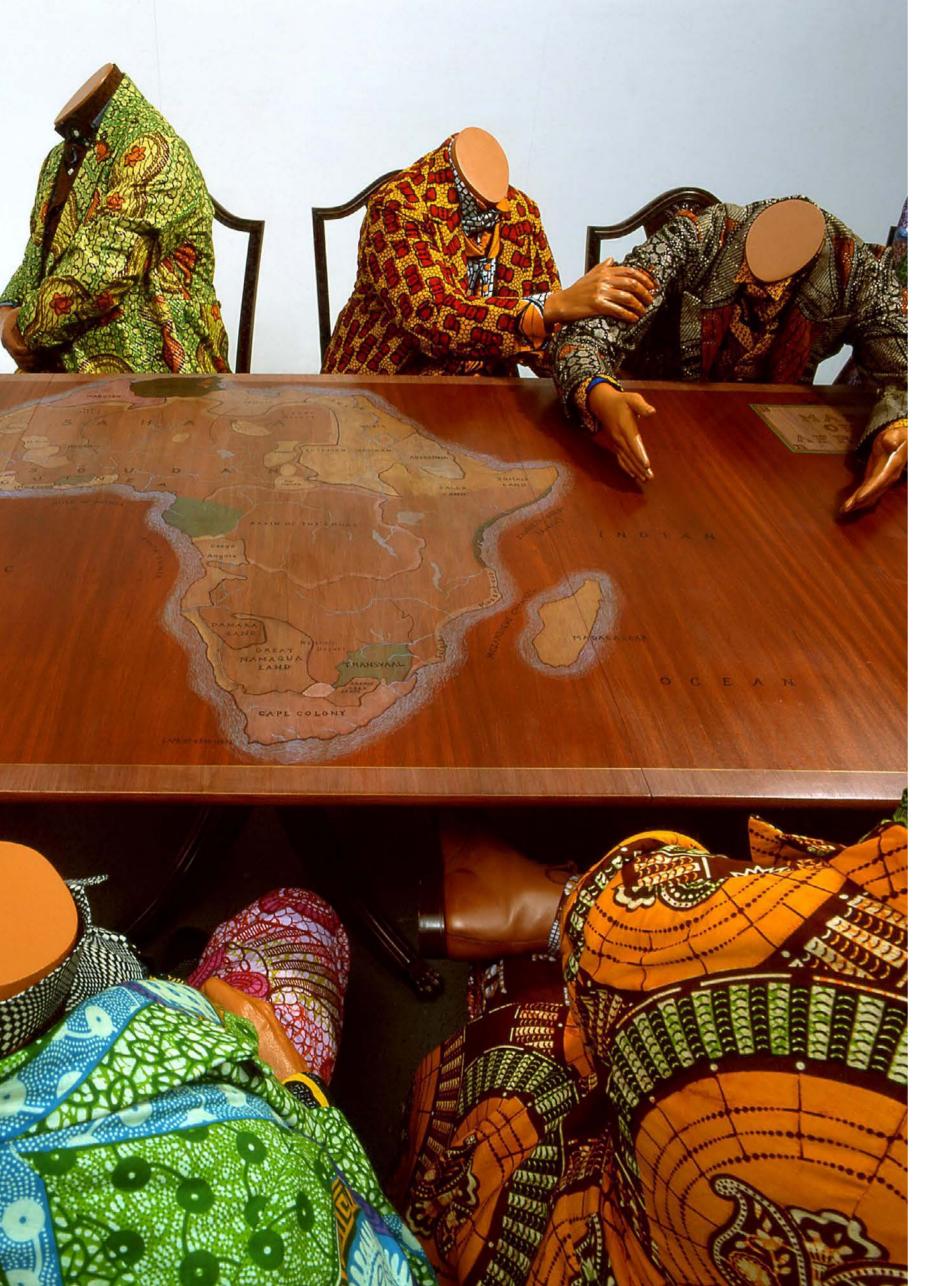
Mr and Mrs Andrews without their heads, 1998, 165 × 635 × 254 cm with plinth Two mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, dog mannequin, painted metal bench, rifle













Left: Scramble for Africa, 2003, 132  $\times$  488  $\times$  280 cm

Fourteen life-size fiberglass mannequin, fourteen chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton textile

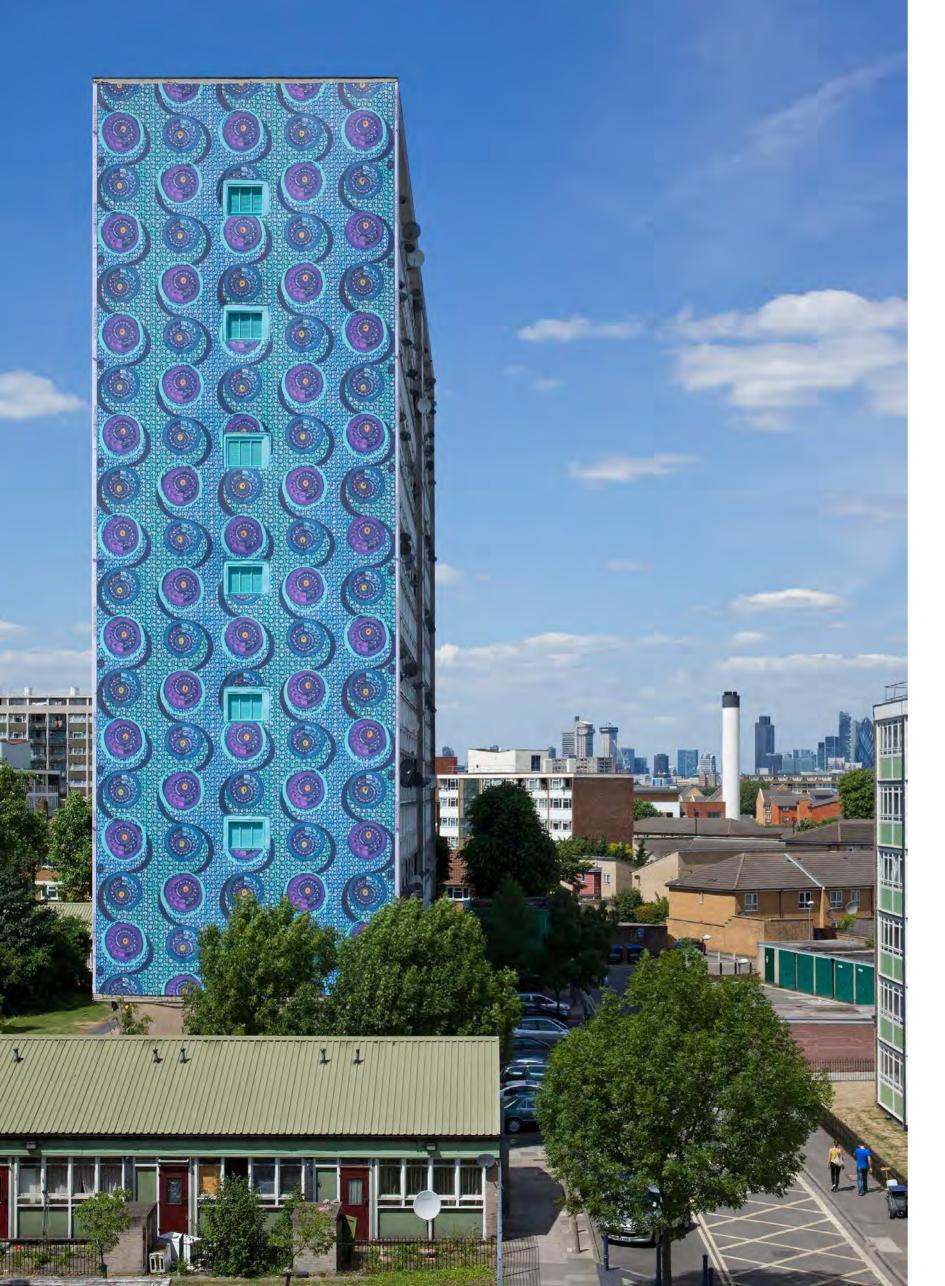
Black Gold I, 2006, 330  $\times$  673 cm

Twenty-five canvases with Dutch wax printed cotton textiles and acrylic emulsion on painted wall











Left: Wall (Nothing is Forever), 2010, dimensions variable
Dutch wax design on building façade, South London Gallery

Nelson's Ship in a Bottle, 2010, 290 × 525 × 235 cm Fibreglass, steel, resin, UV ink on Dutch wax print cotton, linen rigging, acrylic, wood, Trafalgar Square, London, 24 May 2010 – 30 January 2012







p.28, Winged Victory of Samothrace, 2017, 142.5  $\times$  87  $\times$  92 cm, fibreglass sculpture, hand-painted with Dutch Wax pattern and bespoke hand-coloured globe and steel baseplate

The Bird Catcher's Dilemma, 2019, 161 × 280 × 120 cm, fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, globe, brass, steel baseplate, wooden cart, bird cages, artificial birds





End of Empire, 2016, 296 × 510 × 99 cm, fibreglass mannequins,

Dutch wax printed cotton textile, metal, wood, motor, globes and leather

Creatures of the Mappa Mundi, Mandragora, 2018, 185 × 134 cm Patchwork, appliqué, embroidery and Dutch wax printed cotton textile













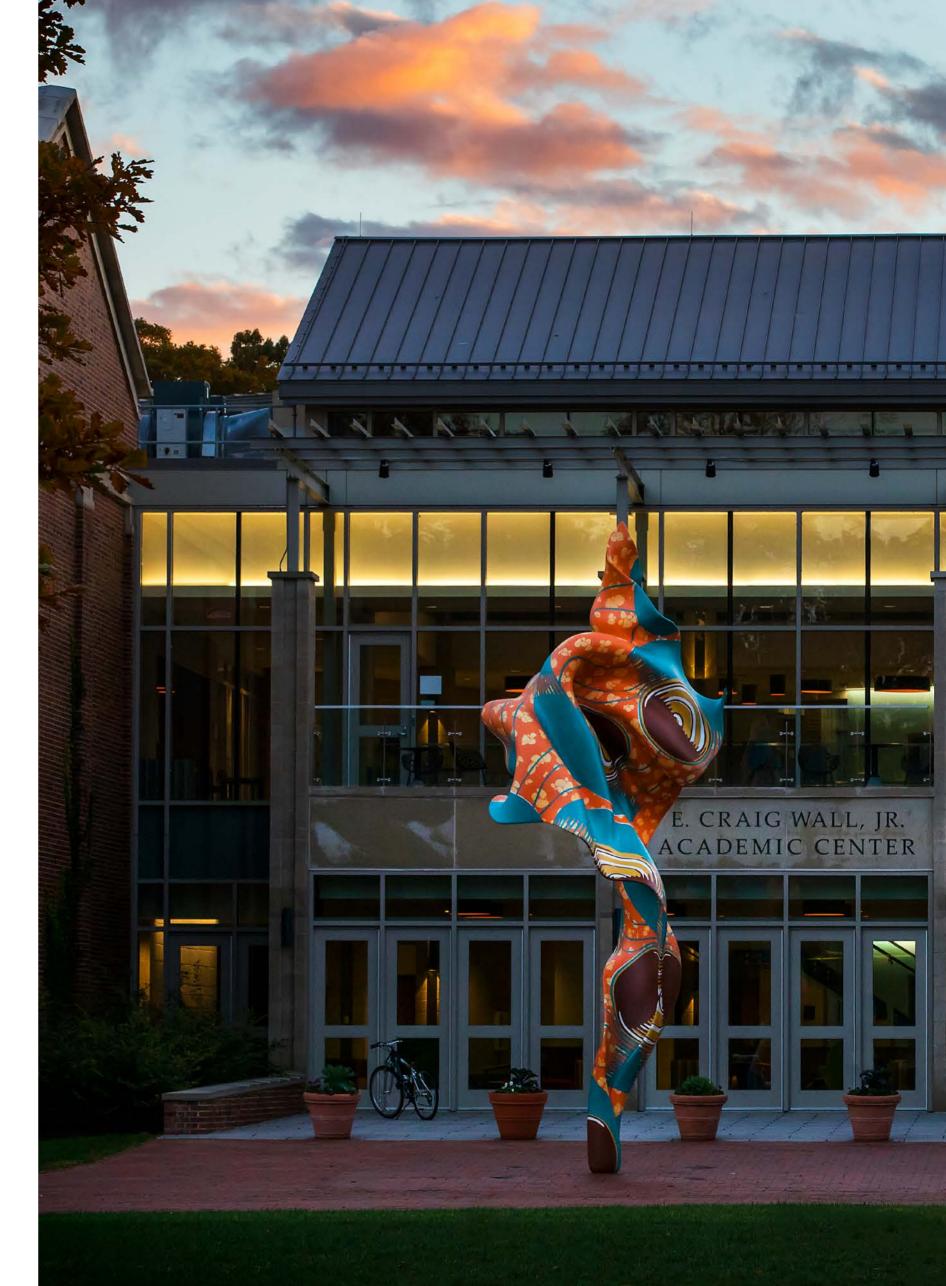
Wind Sculpture, 2014, 610 × 340 × 80 cm, Howick Place, London

Wind Sculpture IV, 2014, 610 × 340 × 80 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Wind Sculpture V, 2014, 610  $\times$  340  $\times$  80 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago Wind Sculpture VI, 2014, 610  $\times$  340  $\times$  80 cm, Royal Academy, London

Wind Sculpture VI, 2014, 610 × 340 × 80 cm, Ndubuisi Kanu Park, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria

Wind Sculpture (SG) I, 2018,  $700 \times 254 \times 200$  cm, Doris C. Freedman Plaza, New York



## Acknowledgments

The Whitechapel Gallery Trustees, my colleagues and the many artists we work with join me in expressing heartfelt gratitude to all those important individuals who have supported us in celebrating the work of Yinka Shonibare CBE RA.

We value our longstanding partner the Swarovski Foundation for its commitment to culture and creativity. I am personally grateful to the trailblazing leader Nadja Swarovski for her passion and integrity in championing the arts and am honoured to be celebrating the 10th anniversary of our partnership.

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Lucy Shepherd

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Oba Nsugbe QC
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Catherine Petitgas
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Maria Sukkar
Nadja Swarovski
Andreas Teoh
Helen Waters
(Cristea Roberts Gallery)

For her exclusive performance, energy and enthusiasm, my thanks to four-time Grammy Award winner Angélique Kidjo.

Chevenne Westphal

For her charisma and passion, thank you to our host Rakie Avola.

The Whitechapel Gallery Art Icon Award coincides with our annual fundraising gala. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those who have contributed to the event, in particular our colleagues: Ailbhe Clyne and Ruth Hogan at Yinka Shonibare Studio James and Jane Cohan at James Cohan Gallery

Nate Erwin and Kevin Morris at Red Light Management Karon Hepburn at Stephen Friedman Bimpe Nkontchou at Wealth 8 LLC Jo Stella-Sawicka at Goodman Gallery

at Goodman Gallery David Roberts and Helen Waters at Cristea Roberts

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Finally, for accepting our invitation and his investment and energy, our thanks to the artist: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA

All images courtesy the artist and

Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

#### Iwona Blazwick OBE

Flora Yukhnovich

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Cover: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA, 2014 Photo: James Mollison Back cover: Wind Sculpture (SG) I in progress. Photo: Jonathan Bassett

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