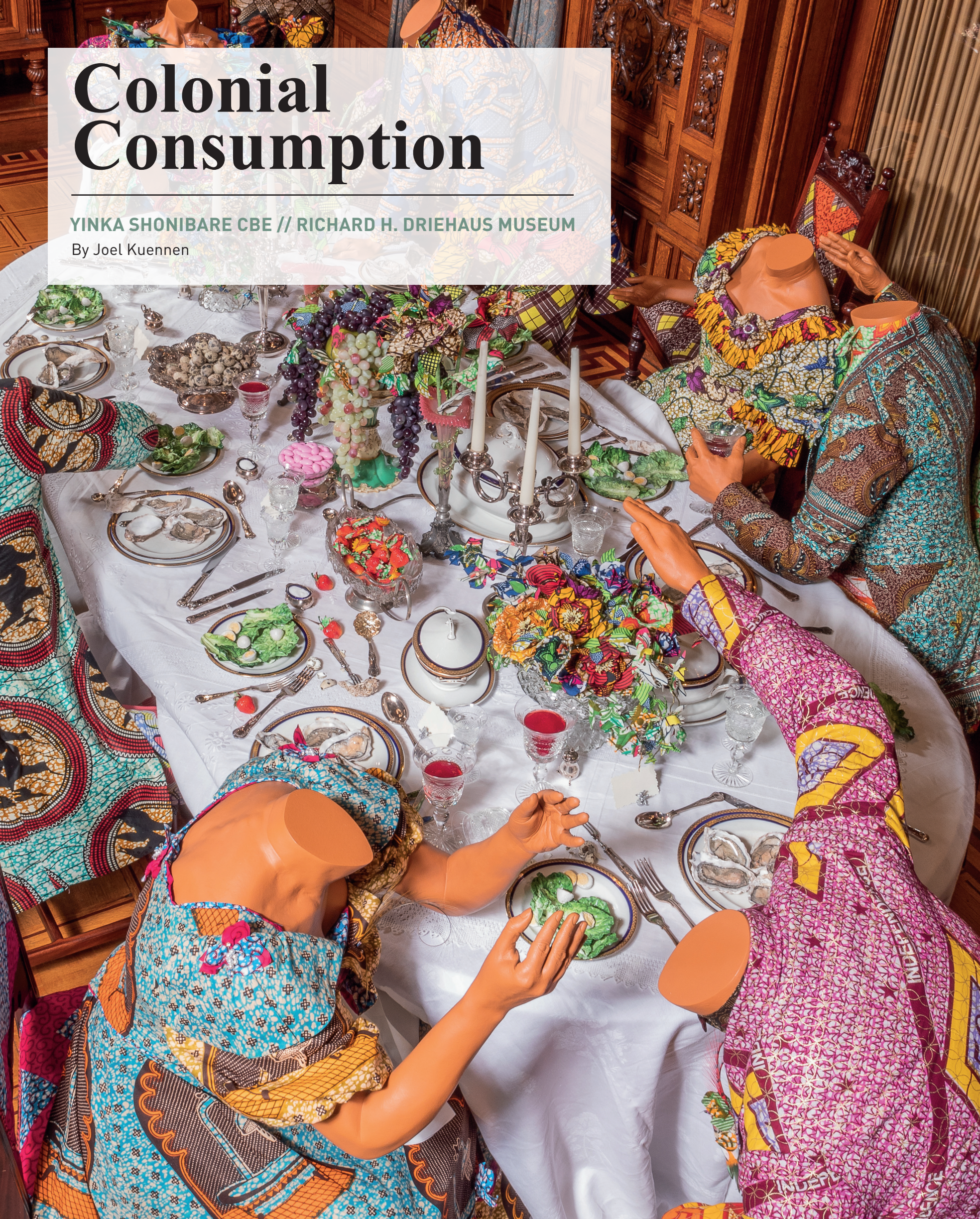


Colonial Consumption

YINKA SHONIBARE CBE // RICHARD H. DRIEHAUS MUSEUM

By Joel Kuennen



THE SEEN

It is the late 1800s. Robber barons roamed the land like the herds of bison that once had, hoovering up the capital generated by the violent, colonialist westward expansion across the Great Plains. Transcontinental railways, scarring mines, and cotton farms tilled by newly freed slaves fueled factories manned by children, churning out the fabric of an expanding nation. From this hurtling engine, wealth accrued in the highest echelons of society to such an excessive degree that this period would become likened to a lead candelabra plated in gold: The Gilded Age.

At the same time in Indonesia, the Dutch were trying to turn their colonial subjects into consumers by mass producing batik fabric in the Netherlands and shipping it to what at the time was called the Dutch East Indies. However, these cheap rolls of dyed cotton had a flaw, the mechanized process of wax-printed resists created hairline cracks in the wax appliqué. The dye seeped through resulting in a distinctive crackle effect that was offensive to the refined tastes of the Indonesian people who considered batik a highly skilled art form. The would-be consumers rejected the imported product.

However, the Dutch did find buyers on Africa's Gold Coast, and the fashion of Ghana, Nigeria, and much of West Africa was changed forever. Now known as African Wax, Hollandaise, or Dutch Wax, the crackled, colorful batiks are seen as African by outsiders and Africans alike. It is this fabric that British-born, Nigerian-raised, Yinka Shonibare CBE¹ (RA)² masterfully leans on to tell a complex story of power, class, and race that spans our

globe and reaches out from the past to inflect our present. The Richard H. Driehaus Museum will play host to some of Shonibare's most famous sculptures and photographic works through the end of September 2019. It is the inaugural exhibition in their contemporary art series, *A Tale of Today: New Artists at the Driehaus*. Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) is by no means new to Chicago—one of the works on display at the Driehaus, *Big Boy* (2002) is in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In the summer of 2014, three of his wind sculptures were installed on the plaza of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

However, the Gilded Age mansion that houses the Driehaus Museum is a venue perfectly suited to the thematic underpinnings of his work. *Party Time: Re-Imagine America* (2009) was first installed at the Newark Museum's Ballantine House, an 1885 beer baron mansion. Here, *Party Time* is installed within the Driehaus Museum's dining room, the headless figures carousing, dressed in Victorian-cut Hollandaise. Shonibare's figures are tailored from the cloth of colonization, but their positionality is ambiguous. Are these figures Europeans dressed in the wealth taken from their colonies? Are they members of the Royal Niger Company?³ Are they Africans who have adopted the customs of Europeans out of necessity? Customers who have taken to a product of global trade? Or is it a complex array of the above?



“Is the ability to dictate the appropriation of symbols to be incorporated into designs which are then sold back to you power? Or are these dandies dipped in African patterns colonization incarnate?”



“Shonibare’s figures are tailored from the cloth of colonization, but their positionality is ambiguous.”

————— *Big Boy* (2002) and *Child on a Unicycle* (2005), the other sculptural textile works included in this exhibition are exuberant, triumphant, and full of confidence. *Child* perches atop a large wheel, headless, arms raised, fingers pointing up and out to the horizon. *Big Boy* struts into the room like large, creaking doors have just swung wide open, finally allowing him entrée.

When Hans Ouwendijk, chief executive of Vlisco Group, one of the oldest Dutch Wax producers, joined the company he said, “What surprised me most when I first started working for Vlisco was that the African consumers really feel like they own our brand, not the other way around. And it’s how they perceive their products that counts.”⁴ Is this entrée? Is the ability to dictate the appropriation of symbols to be incorporated into designs which are then sold back to you power? Or are these dandies dipped in African patterns colonization incarnate?

In the two photographic series on display, *Dorian Gray* (2001) and *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998), Shonibare inserts himself into fictitious scenes in an act of interpolation. Shonibare becomes Dorian Gray, the Victorian dandy. These transformations are simple, and it is in their simplicity that they find their edge. While his sculptural works at the Driehaus Museum are without explicit identity, these photo series rely on the insertion of his Black body into a British mythology, an act asked of colonized populations in order to exist within the order of the empire.

————— Given the setting of this exhibition in Chicago’s “Marble Palace,” I am reminded of the mythologies we still buy into. The Gilded Age barons reproduced the royal opulence of the Victorian age in their Midwestern mansions, striving to exhibit wealth as they had imagined it to be.

————— Thorstein Veblen said in his Golden Age treatise from 1899, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, “The domestic life of most classes is relatively shabby, as compared with the éclat of that overt portion of their life that is carried on before the eyes of observers.”⁵ The performance of wealth to this day supersedes the more complex mythologies of culture—mythologies of the spirit, of the social group. When those aspirational, ethically-driven mythologies lost their power, a gilded spirit swept into the vacuum, like the flush of a golden toilet.

————— *A Tale of Today: Yinka Shonibare CBE* runs at the Driehaus Museum through September 29, 2019.

- 1 CBE signifies Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, a chivalric, fraternal designation recognizing Shonibare’s cultural contributions bestowed on him by the Queen of England in 2019. In 2005 he was designated as an MBE, Member of Order of the British Empire. These imperial designations are purposefully touted by Shonibare.
- 2 RA stands for Royal Academician. Shonibare is one of eighty Royal Academicians who makes up the British Royal Academy of Art.
- 3 The Royal Niger Company was a British mercantile group that exploited Nigeria’s resources from 1871-1900 and was the precursor to the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria (1914-1960).
- 4 Robb Young, “Africa’s Fabric is Dutch,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2012.
- 5 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), 112.

TITLE PAGE, PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Yinka Shonibare CBE (British/Nigerian, b. 1962) *Party Time: Re-imagine America* (detail), 2009. Fiberglass mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, leather boots, table, eight chairs, and other mixed-media. Collection of the Newark Museum, Purchase 2010 Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund. 2010. Photograph by Michael Tropea, 2019.

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Yinka Shonibare CBE (British/Nigerian, b. 1962) *Big Boy*, 2002. Wax-printed cotton fabric, fiberglass. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Susan and Lewis Manilow, 2004. Photograph by Michael Tropea, 2019.

FOLLOWING SPREADS, IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

Yinka Shonibare CBE (British/Nigerian, b. 1962) *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 11.00 hours*, 1998. Series of five chromogenic photographs. 48 x 72 inches. From the Collection of Amy and John Phelan. Image © Yinka Shonibare CBE, courtesy James Cohan, New York.

Yinka Shonibare CBE (British/Nigerian, b. 1962) *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 19.00 hours*, 1998. Series of five chromogenic photographs. 48 x 72 inches. From the Collection of Amy and John Phelan. Image © Yinka Shonibare MBE, courtesy James Cohan, New York.

Yinka Shonibare CBE (British/Nigerian, b. 1962) *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 14.00 hours*, 1998. Series of five chromogenic photographs. 48 x 72 inches. From the Collection of Amy and John Phelan. Image © Yinka Shonibare CBE, courtesy James Cohan, New York.

Yinka Shonibare CBE (British/Nigerian, b. 1962) *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 17.00 hours*, 1998. Series of five chromogenic photographs. 48 x 72 inches. From the Collection of Amy and John Phelan. Image © Yinka Shonibare CBE, courtesy James Cohan, New York.

Yinka Shonibare CBE (British/Nigerian, b. 1962) *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 03.00 hours*, 1998. Series of five chromogenic photographs. 48 x 72 inches. From the Collection of Amy and John Phelan. Image © Yinka Shonibare CBE, courtesy James Cohan, New York.

Diary of a
Victorian Dandy









