

A large, multi-tiered wedding cake is the background of the image. The cake is decorated with white frosting, white flowers, and a slice is being cut. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box.

YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

LET THEM
EAT CAKE!



Cake Man IV, 2015
Fibreglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, plaster, polystyrene, globe, leather and steel baseplate

Yinka Shonibare MBE¹ was born in 1962 to Nigerian parents in London and raised in Lagos, Nigeria. He relocated to London at the age of seventeen and later studied Fine Art, first at Byam School of Art (now Central Saint Martins College) and then at Goldsmiths College, where he received his Master of Fine Arts degree. In 2002 Okwui Enwezor commissioned him to create his pivotal work *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* for documenta XI that launched him onto the international art stage. Since then Shonibare exhibited at the Venice Biennial in 2007 and at many leading museums worldwide.

Shonibare works in a multiple range of media—from sculpture, painting, and installation to photography and—to investigate issues of colonialism and post-colonialism alongside race, class, and cultural identity. Having described himself as a “post-colonial” hybrid, Shonibare questions the meaning of cultural and national definitions.

Yinka Shonibare first came to widespread attention through his use of Dutch wax prints, also known as African wax prints,² which he used as a support for in his paintings and to clothe his sculptures or performers in cinematic tableaux. This brightly coloured “African” batik fabric, which he buys at London’s Brixton Market, actually originated and was made in Indonesia, before being mass-produced by the Dutch and eventually introduced to West Africa in the 19th century by tradesmen from Europe. It subsequently became very popular and is considered as a characteristic and traditional African fabric. Although not invented in Africa these vibrant textiles became a signifier of identitarian “authenticity” both in Africa and, later, for Africans in England. “Origins and authenticity, high art and popular culture are recurring themes in Shonibare’s art, brought into focus through the symbolism of Dutch wax fabric ...”³

The Nicola Erni Collection showcases a sculpture *Cake Man IV* (2015), of a life-size mannequin—alluding to an aristocrat—wearing a Victorian⁴ outfit in Shonibare’s trademark, colorful, Dutch wax-printed cotton fabric which, through its Indonesian design, references Asia and the continent’s colonial practices, whereas the material references European colonial practices in Africa. *Cake Man IV* appears bent, carefully balancing a silver tray on his back piled high with colorful and lavishly decorated cakes—even striking flowers and fresh berries are part of the decadent ornamentation. The vivid colors and the meticulous finish of the cakes and the figure’s Victorian dress celebrate a high visual aesthetic. By using beauty Shonibare draws in viewers and gains their attention before confronting them with less comfortable truths about the world we live in. In many of his sculptures Shonibare removes his figure’s heads, pointing out the guillotined fate which awaited the excessive and corrupt French aristocracy in the 18th Century. Within the *Cake Man* series, he decided to replace the heads with globes that show graphs from financial markets around the world, charting the collapse of the banking system. We might read this evidence as a “commentary on the excess of anonymous financiers across the globe that contributed to the 2008 financial crisis.”⁵

Since Shonibare is considered a political and social artist we might want to ask: what is this sculpture about? The artist himself gives an answer to our question: “*Cake Man* is essentially about greed, the burden of carrying wealth and never having enough. Even though it weighs you down, you still want more.”⁶

His works can be seen as an invitation to reflect upon history, its legacy for future generations and to be conscious about what is going on at present and not to forget about destructive patterns from the past which tend to get repeated across time.⁷

Apart from all the theorizing about coloniality and the politics of identity and raising awareness for the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, beauty and seduction are the weapons’s Shonibare uses to convey his messages to the world.

Ira Stehmann

¹ In 2004 Shonibare was awarded the MBE (Member of The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire). It is an “order of chivalry of the British constitutional monarchy,” rewarding contributions to the arts and sciences, work with charitable and welfare organisations, and public service outside the Civil Service. Shonibare has added this title to his professional name.

² An African wax print is a printed cotton fabric of plain weave to which the design is applied with hot wax or resin on both sides of the cloth.

³ Rachel Kent, “Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE,” in: *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, Munich/London/New York 2014, p. 7.

⁴ The Victorian era in Africa (c. 1830–90) coincided with the height of the British Empire in Africa.

⁵ www.artnet.com/galleries/pearl-lam-galleries/yinka-shonibare-mbe-ra-dreaming-rich/

⁶ Interview with Yinka Shonibare, in: artasiapacific.com/Blog/LetThemEatCakeYinkaShonibare, January 3, 2014.

⁷ See Kent, “Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE”, p.7.

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