We talk to the Turner Prize nominee Yinka Shonibare about the work that got him nominated for this year's award

For over 10 years, Yinka Shonibare has been clothing his sculptures and canvases in brightly coloured textiles bought from Bosun market in south London. "I find it a strange concept that I can take something like a craft or 'low art' material, throw it around and produce high art," he says. "An artist only has to breathe on these commonplace materials and they become objects that people handle with white gloves, upright part or speak quietly around."

However, even before manipulating his chosen material, this heavily patterned cloth, often referred to as "Dutch wax", has already undergone a convoluted transformation—originating in Indonesia as batik, then mass-produced in the Netherlands or Britain, before being exported to West Africa or the street markets of, say, London or New York. Invariably, nothing in Shonibare's art, as in life, is as authentic as it first appears, and he admits his highly decorative work "looks aesthetic, but is political."

His elaborate installation for this year's Turner Prize exhibition at Tate Britain includes The Swing, which was recently purchased by Tate for its permanent collection. It's a playful distortion of The Swing, a genteel remove and examine painted by Jean-Honore Fragonard in 1766 at the request of theready nobleman who appears in the picture looking up the coquettish girl's skirt.

In Shonibare's version she is replaced by a headless figure (in reference to the impending French Revolution), while her ruffled dress and petticoat are fashioned from grassy, ethnic fabrics, an apparent symbol of African identity. This melange of western upper-class luxury and cheap African commodity summarizes Shonibare's continuing exploration of the heroes and heroines in post-colonial Britain, as well as his own shifting identity.

Although born in England, Shonibare grew up in a middle-class neighbourhood of Lagos, Nigeria. "So it was a surprise when I came to art school in London and my tutor said, 'Why don't you produce authentic African art? I had never even been to a traditional African village?'

Every new usage of his trademark African print is a way of shattering such stereotypical views of what is expected from black artists. Indeed, without warning, Shonibare switches from painting to sculpture to photography, and, most recently, to film.

Based on the story of the 18th-century Swedish king Gustav III, his latest work, Un Ballo in Maschera, is a 32-minute dance routine that tells the story of the monarch's ambitions of national expansion and wars on all sides with Russia, Norway and Denmark that are thwarted when he is assassinated by a stranger at a masked ball. The conspiracy, actually a wealthy arts patron and a dandy, dances a solo before shooting the king—a scene that Shonibare has the actors re-enact three times in succession, in quad to the usual looping sequences of video art. Shonibare suggests the film could be understood as a metaphor for current world events, saying, "I always feel so-called freedom fighters or fundamentalists resemble their oppressors in the end."

The traditional Swedish costumes are again made from African material, showing Shonibare's interest in the social interpretations of fashion. "Covering your body," he says, "is one way in which you express your identity."

The Turner Prize, sponsored by Gordon's gin, is at Tate Britain until December 23.
IN CONTEXT

Other artists who are referenced by, or have influenced Yinka Shonibare

Yinka Shonibare’s witty reallumes of famous paintings gently lampoon the conventions and history of art. In addition to Fragonard’s The Swing, his version of British painter Thomas Gainsborough’s portrayal of upper-class landed gentry, Mr and Mrs Andrews (1750), reconfigures the pair as life-size Africanised mannequins, again without heads.

William Hogarth’s prints and paintings depicting The Rake’s Progress, directly inspired Shonibare’s The Diary of a Victorian Dandy (1999), a series of staged photographic self-portraits in which the artist plays a society gentleman who, ironically for a black figure in such an obviously historical setting, takes centre stage as though in a scene from an English period drama.

Another major influence is Oscar Wilde, whose politics of dandyism are emulated by Shonibare through his use of fashion and humour, and whose writings are overtly referenced in another series of self-portraits called Dorian Gray.

The material girl of 1960s and 70s art, Yayoi Kusama, has used cloth in similar ways to Shonibare, covering her soft, bulbous sculptural furnishings and psychedelic installations in polka dots or striped fabrics. Another artist of Kusama’s generation, Frenchman Daniel Buren, stumpled across a roll of red and white candy-striped canvas intended for roller blinds that subsequently became his signature motif, much as stretched batik is now associated with Shonibare’s output.

Although female contemporary artists such as Rosemary Trockel and Ghada Amer are known for employing textiles and embroidery in their work, few male artists engage fashion, fabric, politics and history with the fluency and humour of Shonibare. He has even been known to target the mischposturing of American abstract expressionist painters such as Barnett Newman in his recent paintings.

The makers of Gordon’s gin are the proud sponsors of the Turner Prize. We talk to Sean Philips, a distiller working for the makers of Gordon’s, and one of the “noses” who ensures the quality of the gin.

Instinct forms a major part of the creative process, but it also has a role to play in producing the nation’s favourite gin, as Sean Philips knows well. He is on the expert “nosing” panel at the Gordon’s distillery, and uses his sense of smell to ensure the quality of all the different flavours that find their way into a bottle.

“We make mini distillations of each of the botanicals,” he says. “The distinct flavour comes from the juniper and the other secret herbs that go into Gordon’s gin. Then a nosing panel of around half a dozen people decide which batch of botanicals is the best.” Philips says it’s hard to describe exactly what aromas he and the other noses are looking for. “When it’s really fresh, juniper smells almost like a freshly cut green apple,” he says. “Many people say it also has the scent of pine. But we’re trying to detect the really subtle notes within the aromas.”

Phillips has been using his nose at Gordon’s for 18 years, and it has become an extremely sensitive piece of equipment.

“It takes at least five years of constant nosing, I mean using it every single day, to get it up to the standard of a really expert nose,” he says. “If you get a cold or you have a curry the night before, you’re not much use the next day.”