Cat. 28 Scramble for Africa, 2000, by Yinka Shonibare.
14 figures, 14 chairs, table, overall dimensions:
132 x 488 x 280 cm. Commissioned by the Museum for
African Art, N.Y. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen
Friedman Gallery, London.
Yinka Shonibare

of hedonism, masquerade, carnivalesque and power

A Conversation with Okwui Enwezor

Okwui Enwezor: An assumption that's central to your practice is its exploration of that imaginary space between Africa and Europe, and between colonial and post-colonial discourse. How have those two notions played out in your work of the last ten years?

Yinka Shonibare: What I find interesting is the idea that you cannot define Africa without Europe. The idea that there is some kind of dichotomy between Africa and Europe—between the "exotic other" and the "civilized European," if you like—I think is completely simplistic. So I'm interested in exploring the mythology of these two so-called separate spheres, and in creating an overlap of complexities. This I think art does well, because it takes you into a third area—an area of complexity that, as a product of British colonization and therefore of what is considered a hybrid culture, opens up a space to question the determination of Africa in European discourse.

At the beginning of my career I felt a kind of trauma about the question of loyalty, and where my allegiance should lie. One reason my practice has evolved in the way it has is that I concluded that this notion of loyalty to one culture is unrealistic, and in fact very distant from the reality of my everyday life.

OE: Is it impossible to define Africa without Europe? I would tend to disagree— isn't it in fact quite possible to define Africa without Europe? And if I invert that statement, perhaps it isn't altogether impossible to define Europe without Africa?

YS: I think it works both ways. I consider the notion of Africa we have inherited a fundamentally geographical notion, and one I think alien to African culture. Take Egypt and Nigeria: I cannot conceive of two cultures more dissimilar, yet both fit within that geographical notion—it's just that one is more Arab and the other is less. In fact the kinds of indigenous culture you find in sub-Saharan Africa you can't say are the same as those in North Africa, just as, in the United Kingdom, you wouldn't dare to call the Scottish people the same as the English; they may speak a common language but culturally they're two peoples. The problem with this notion of Africa that is imposed from outside is its conflation of everybody into this pot called Africa. It doesn't take cultural nuances and differences into account.

OE: Let's talk about the early reception of your work, and the beginning of your use of "African" fabric, with its mechanically printed designs. I am interested to hear how you work with the convoluted route this fabric has traveled to become a sign and marker of Africaness. What has happened since you first proposed the relationship between its supposed authenticity and tradition, between the fabric as commodity and its fetish status in connection to the fantasy of identity? I'm also interested in the way you've reworked the narrative of the fabric to comment on a range of models within modernism, especially painterly abstraction.

YS: In the beginning, since people had somehow assumed that "African" fabric was
an expression of African authenticity, a lot of them were surprised to learn that the fabric was Dutch in origin, was related to Indonesian batik, and was industrially manufactured in Holland and in Manchester. In the 1970s, too, progressive Afrocentric political movements had reappropriated the fabric, making it a symbol of African culture and nationalism—so some people simply assumed that I was using it in some kind of naive expression of my own Africanness (Figs. 97, 98).

Now from my point of view this assumption negated the idea of the African artist as engaged with modernist discourse. My real concern was to challenge the idea of the grid in Western modernism, and to reintroduce supposedly nonart material—the functional, the ethnic other—that then would contaminate the “pure” space of high modernism. I think my use of African fabric to engage modernist practice was less played out, or less discussed, in the reception of my work at the beginning.

Of course I was also aware of a lot of the artists of the time: the “Neo-Geo” artists in New York, for example, and the European Transavanguardia, and the international neo-Expressionism of the early 1980s, and the artists looking at the idea of pattern in the 1970s. My own interest at this point was not just pattern as a kind of stylistic effect of high modernism, but pattern as a cultural signifier. As somebody of African origin, I wanted to question the way representation can be used as a way of marginalizing people. I also became interested in the fabric’s complex history.

OE: So initially no one saw that you were using the fabric conceptually? It was viewed more as an expressive, noncritical tool?

YS: Exactly. But there were of course writers who understood the underlying issues. An article by Kobena Mercer in Frieze ("Art That Is Ethnic in Inverted Commas: On Yinka Shonibare," Frieze no. 25, November/December 1995) was I suppose the first magazine article to address the conceptual and historical background of what I was doing—to touch on the issues of painting and modernism I was concerned with. There were catalogue essays before that; I think the first must have been in the publication for “Seen/Unseen,” curated by Olu Oguibe at the Bluecoat Gallery in Liverpool [in 1994].

At the same time, there’s a kind of complicity on my own part that I need to explain: what I’m doing is not so clear-cut. People might assume that I have a total critical distance from my practice, but I don’t think that’s the case; it’s more complex, because, on one level, I challenge the denial of my African background. In other words, a part of my work has to do with visibility—with my own attempt to make my origin visible. I have chosen to remain in control of my own representation, and therefore, while the use of the African fabric is on the one hand a critical look at representation, or at what might represent the African, it is simultaneously a celebration. So it is actually a negation and a celebration simultaneously.

OE: How does that work, negation and celebration?

YS: Well, on the one hand I reserve the right to use satire and humor in my work, because they dissolve serious issues, some
of which are political. Humor is a fantastic way of taming them. But on the other hand I enjoy painting. I was trained as a painter, and I don’t separate the aesthetic from the political—the aesthetic is actually an expression of the political, right? You can do politics formally. That’s a simple way of putting it; the way I do it, it’s more in a kind of challenging, carnivalesque way, in which I stick my tongue out. No group has a monopoly on aesthetics.

You have to realize that I was working against the background of the “Black art movement” in the U.K. at the time, and if you can rewind back to that period you will realize how for me the Black art movement had a lot in common with the Harlem Renaissance; it was a kind of artificial U.K. “re-naissance” of the Harlem Renaissance, which did not connect with me. The African experience in the U.S. I think is different from the Afro-Caribbean experience in the U.K.

OE: Wouldn’t you say that the carnivalesque poses the question of a self-conscious repetition of certain stereotypical modes, often attached to the idea of the non-European other, that you initially wanted to critique? Perhaps you’re making the carnivalesque a point of irony, but don’t you see a danger that its deployment may begin to meet all the simplistic requirements within which the so-called black artist is supposed to perform?

YS: But I always include an element of the unexpected. For example, I am well-known for my use of Victoriana, right? And for an artist of African background to be known for using Victoriana is a complete contradiction. I’m producing something that looks totally other, but it’s actually a mimicking or a “kitschivization” of the establishment—you’ve got African kitsch against European kitsch. And when you collapse those two, you’re left standing in the middle wondering, Where is this guy going? Who is he
mimicking? Is he an admirer of colonial imagery, is he celebrating it? Or is he critiquing it.

OE: Which is it? How does critique function when it’s easy to become ambivalent about it? Is it possible to use the repressive morality of Victoriana and simultaneously its kitschiness, its excess, to comment on issues of fantasy, desire, and colonialism?

YS: Well, what a lot of commentators haven’t referred to in my work, even in the paintings, is its aggressive nature, its symbolic beheading of power. It doesn’t necessarily look like Goya, where you see blood; nor is it necessarily abject—

OE: But the decapitation signals a critical relationship to authority?

YS: Yes, symbolically, when you take it in the context of the French Revolution and what happened to the aristocracy... .

OE: But one could still say that since your figures are mannequins, their symbolic beheading may not register as critique.

YS: I want to look at my practice in the area of the poetic. Speech—direct speech, or journalism—is sure to declare itself and its intentions clearly; that is the nature of straight speech or journalism. The poet finds another thing, which is the use of words to become another order of signification. Then that becomes an integral part of speech. One has expression, but the artist can never be as sure as the critic, because the artist is skeptical by nature, so that what is expressed is always contradicting itself. In other words, my work occupies the space of contradiction.

OE: Let’s take that as a point of departure for the idea of trauma, and the kind of allegiance an artist like you is called on to show, the world you are called on to inhabit, and the obvious issue of hybridity. You say all these are part of what you’re exploring. Can you talk about them a bit more? For whom is this allegiance important?

YS: To talk about this, I must go back to my childhood in Nigeria and then move toward my adulthood in Europe. In Nigeria I was open to a lot of experiences: I was living in Lagos, a contemporary society, and I could watch American programs and just basically be a citizen of the world, show interest in many things simultaneously—I did not have to choose. Then when I moved to Europe, to my surprise, I had to choose. I believe that my blackness began when I stepped off the plane at Heathrow. I did not have a notion or a concept of blackness until I stepped off the plane.

I came here to study, to train as a painter. I did academic life painting and drawing, like any other artist. And progressively, throughout my second year here, my work became political. I started to make work about global issues because I saw myself as a global citizen. I made work about perestroika, for example, which was going on then in Russia; I saw that the cold war was coming to an end, and I thought that was a globally significant issue and I wanted to explore it. One of my tutors came into my space and said, “Well, you’re African, aren’t you? Why aren’t you producing authentic traditional African art?” And of course, given my background, the whole notion that I would understand the concept of some pure African authenticity, or for that matter that such an expression would be expected of me, I found utterly shocking, negating my engagement with modernism and modernization as well. So I decided to explore the notion of authenticity and what it might signify. That was when I realized that the idea of loyalty or allegiance is always imposed by others from the outside.

OE: So for you the trauma is this consciousness of your blackness, which you had no awareness of because you were living in a society that did not work in this racially charged hierarchical way. The trauma is your separation from the body of your upbringing, and then your reinsertion into this racialized political framework of ethnicity and difference.

YS: Yes. I think it was during my art school education that I realized I was not going to
be allowed to be a universal, anonymous artist—if there is such a thing; but that was my utopian view. It was quite a revelation because I realized that regardless of my internal thoughts, the way I was perceived on the outside was different.

I also realized that I was in a double bind. If I made work about being black, I would be considered simply an artist who made work about blackness; if I did not make work about being black, people would speak of me as a black artist who did not make work about blackness. I realized that in this particular, European context the priority wouldn’t be your practice, it would be your race—especially at that time, when identity was such a focus for international art. It was the time of Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger—those issues were at the forefront. So I decided, OK, my way of dealing with this will be to create a confusion. I will locate myself in the area of confusion because confusion is actually more honest on my part, it is a closer expression of where I am. I don’t mean “confusion” negatively.

OE: So here in art school there was a second shock: the shock that you had to be a black artist, and that being a black artist meant you ought to be working with blackness, in terms of form, technique, iconography, imagery, whatever. Did this professor talk about what this authentic African thing might be, and why you were supposed to work that way?

YS: He didn’t, exactly, but I think he simply assumed that as a black African I would want to express and make art about my condition and about Africa. That I would want to make work about traditional African art. And of course I’ve never actually been to an African village. I’ve only seen one on television.

OE: All the time you lived in Lagos, you never visited a Yoruba village?

YS: No.

OE: You lived exclusively in Lagos? You never visited other parts of Nigeria?

YS: Not apart from Ibadan, which is a city. I’ve never been to an African village, so the idea that I would have some connection to traditional African art is quite absurd. I can express myself with things I know, but I can’t re-create something that I know nothing about.

OE: There’s obviously an assumption here of what an African village means in terms of authenticity—that the village is where all this authentic African stuff is happening. I’ve actually spent quite a lot of time in the village, visiting from the city, so the trope of the village intrigues me. What do you think an African village looks like?

YS: Well, when I say “the village,” I’m assuming a Western point of view.

OE: OK, you’ve never been to such a place, so you mean the representation of an African village.

YS: Yes, and I don’t think the representation is correct—it’s a nineteenth-century notion. I don’t think the mythical, exotic village—a holiday village for Europeans—still exists in Africa. I also assume that the traditional African art I was expected to create was mainly a nineteenth-century product. No society is static; even an African village will not be the way it was in the nineteenth century.

OE: At least in the last decade or so, you’ve been active on the international scene. How has your consciousness of blackness manifested in relation to the international art world? Has your reception been any different beyond the old borders of empire?

YS: Well, the interesting thing about the evolution of my practice is that it deals with other issues besides blackness. This is obvious from the kinds of exhibitions I’ve been invited to do—the exhibition called “Heaven,” for example, in Düsseldorf and then at Tate Liverpool [in 1999–2000]. The issues that exhibition addressed had to do with glamour and aesthetics, so I think the issues of sexuality, masquerade, and fantasy in my work made it seem a good fit. I tend to be invited to shows dealing with other is-
sues besides blackness, whether questions of art and aesthetics or questions of sexuality, fetishization, and so on—issues that artists are dealing with who may not claim to be talking specifically about identity issues but who operate across cultures in their work. I can honestly say that I feel privileged, because I do a lot of “mainstream” shows that don’t engage with identity issues. Or rather, everything has to do with identity in a way, but they’re not about colonization or colonialism. You’ll find me in “Sensation” and at the same time in shows focused around identity issues. This is one way my political ideas are played out in the exhibitions I get invited to do.

I’m happy not being pinned down, being allowed to move between different spaces, but I have no negative vibe toward exhibitions dealing with issues of colonialism. The reason I say this is that I’m aware of many black artists who will tell you that they don’t do shows about colonialism or blackness.

OE: Do you respect that?
YS: I respect choice. I think people should have choice. But it’s my personal stance that I’m not ashamed of my background. I’m proud of who I am, and I can express being proud of it. I don’t necessarily want to overstate the fact that I’m proud of it—
OE: You don’t want to fetishize your background.
YS: No. But at the same time I’m not hiding from it.
OE: Does the fact that you can move in and out of these zones, that your discursive objects can exist in different spaces of reception and circulation, converge with your old idea of being a universal, anonymous artist?
YS: The problem with the notion of the universal is that there is always an idea of power behind it. The idea of the universal—take architecture as an example, the work of Le Corbusier or someone like that—is that you can build the same building in Africa and in Europe without taking local nuances and cultural differences into consideration. I don’t believe in the universal as an imposed utopian idea for everybody; the local is always significant because cultural practices are always different. The universal always involves an attempt to impose a specific standard on everybody. I find that quite a difficult idea to live with; I reserve the right to move freely between zones.

OE: Is it enough to reserve that right, especially in the kinds of institutional, political, social, and cultural system you’re operating in?
YS: I think I would claim a degree of success. If you look at my career, and the range of exhibitions I’ve been invited to, you will see that I’ve managed to be in the kinds of show I would want to be in, while not avoiding—I emphasize this—not avoiding so-called “black art” shows. If I think the show is good I will participate.
OE: If it’s provocative, if it’s of interest.
YS: Yes, that’s my criterion.
OE: That position touches on this exhibition, which is formulated around the idea of an African diaspora. There seems to me to be a possibility of confusion in the notion of

Fig. 100 Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without Their Heads, 1998, by Yinka Shonibare. Wax-print cotton costumes on armatures, dog, marionquin, bench, gun. Overall dimensions: 165 x 570 x 254 cm. Collection National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.
diaspora in relation to African artists living in the West, and I'd like to begin our exploration of that notion with what you said about your relationship to the Black art movement in England—a movement mostly constituted at the nexus of Afro-Caribbean and African-American thought around diaspora. Conversely, the notion of an African diaspora that focuses specifically on a range of practices by contemporary artists from East, West, North, and Southern Africa is something entirely new. How genuine do you think this notion of diaspora is, and do you see yourself as part of it?

YS: This is an interesting issue. I would describe it as a distinction between voluntary emigration and enforced emigration. I have to be cautious here, because there is such a thing as enforced emigration for contemporary artists in Africa. But the debates about enforced emigration trace back to slavery; one thinks of the diaspora as it is constituted in the African-American situation, the Afro-Caribbean situation, the Brazilian situation. In that sense the condition that was created by slavery is different from the condition created by contemporary African emigration, to the extent that that emigration is economic. I draw a distinction between those two. It’s not that I don’t have solidarity with the people of the earlier kind of diaspora, but I draw a distinction between it and my kind of diaspora.

OE: How are your British contemporaries from the Caribbean distinct through their historical experience of diaspora from you, and others, through the more contemporary version of diaspora that you call voluntary? How does this distinction function in relation to your own positioning? You say that the experience of an African artist from Africa is different from that of an Afro-Caribbean—how different are they beyond the historical distinctions you’re making?

YS: To use personal experience as an example: I’m bilingual, but my being bilingual doesn’t necessarily create a separate culture. I’m bilingual but I grew up on Michael Jackson like everybody else. My being bilingual doesn’t separate me, then, but it gives me, I think, a kind of self-esteem and confidence. I don’t necessarily mean that the people from the other diaspora don’t have those thoughts, but I think that to position myself under the banner of the enslaved African would from my perspective rather reduce my assertiveness within this culture.

OE: Are you saying that Afro-Caribbeans, African-Americans, and Afro-Brazilians lack this self-confidence? That would be a tall order.

YS: Well, you see, I can’t say that. To make that statement would be simplistic, because the issue of language is complicated, and the issue of being able to trace one’s roots, which was so much explored in the ’70s, has a bearing on the way you engage with a host culture.

OE: But wouldn’t one say that the Afro-Caribbean context in England and the context of an African living in England resemble each other in that both reflect the same kind of migration—the postwar economic migration? In that sense what you seem to be saying may be a contradiction in terms. There is an underlying essentialism here that is quite provocative. Is bilingualism where you hinge this distinction?

YS: I need to explain that my ability to speak an African language, or to be connected to an African culture, is not a singular factor in my self-esteem; it’s a fraction of my makeup. It will always be a fraction of my makeup; it will never be the totality of my makeup. At the same time, from my reading through the Harlem Renaissance, I understand that when you live in an oppressive society there always seems to be a search for a piece of the missing jigsaw, a quest for some connection with your past. It’s like a child that’s adopted: he somehow feels more complete if he can locate his parents.

OE: Would pan-Africanism be a better prism through which to explore the tension in
the formulation of the African diaspora?

YS: Yes, I think pan-Africanism and the African diaspora have a similar kind of political backdrop. But a point of identification is always evident in each: in fact I see those two terms as temporal terms, one located more in the ’50s and ’60s, the other more contemporary, would that be correct?

OE: Historically speaking, no, but it’s true that many would say the pan-Africanist discourse is exhausted. The ideal and the vision persist, though—outgrowths of the nationalism of the independence movements. And pan-Africanisms did not see themselves as dissociated from the social, political, and cultural projects of the African diaspora in the Caribbean, the United States, and Brazil.

Pan-Africanism is many things, whether the DuBoisian African-American version, the post–World War II Manchester-conference formulation of Kwame Nkrumah, or that of Nnamdi Azikiwe in the ’30s. There are all these different models. But beyond that I would like to ask who your contemporaries are in this African diaspora, since it seems quite clear in your head that it exists. You might mention Kendrick Geers—who are the others? Who are the African artists of the diaspora whose work you pay attention to, even if you might not feel an affinity with their practices and discourses?

YS: You ask a difficult question, because I think there’s a way in which curators join people together for the wrong reasons. I also think I find affinity with a lot of artists who are not necessarily of African background but with whom I maybe share something. I draw on those similarities more than on where the artist comes from. In fact it’s an odd thing, the way you asked that question, but I can’t think of an artist with a similar experience to me who I feel is doing something similar to what I’m doing, because I locate myself in the mainstream and at the margin simultaneously.

OE: This is obviously part of the complication that you’ve tried to explore. I find it significant at a time when the political in art has the quality of a taboo. How do you think one can effectively be political in one’s practice, given the prohibitions that are attached to it?

YS: A good example is Marvin Gaye, and the album *What’s Going On?*, which opposed the war in Vietnam. That album was not initially accepted by Motown, Gaye’s record label, you know, they didn’t want to release it because it was very political. But formally it’s an excellent album, even if you don’t listen to the lyrics—formally it’s wonderful. And I think the artists who manage to combine form with content in a strong way get through.

OE: What artists do you think do that, managing a principled, conscientious political engagement without sacrificing artistic merit?

YS: I think about Hans Haacke, but Haacke for me is political without the aesthetic. And this sounds odd, because I respect Hans Haacke highly and he is one of the people I used to look at. Yet I don’t find the level of aesthetic engagement that I want from his work.

OE: OK, Leon Golub?

YS: Leon Golub I also respect highly, and I have looked at him a lot. But I find his work—I don’t know how to say this, but it feels like re-presentations of political events. I don’t feel that it is self-unraveling.

OE: You mean it’s more a re-presentation of politics than political in the subversive way of your work?

YS: Yes.

OE: So your work is dependent not on politics but on the underlying critical and ethical assumptions embedded in the political sphere—issues of representation, relations of power, questions of agency, issues of cultural signification. These are not in a
Fig. 101 a-b Davién Gray, 2001, by Yinka Shonibare. 11 black and white resin prints, 1 digital lambda print, 122 x 152.5 cm, each, edition of 5. Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.
sense topical questions but more philosophical matters insofar as the political is concerned.

YS: Yes. I think of Golub, I think of Haacke, and I think no, this is actually a re-presentation of politics. It’s a questioning, no doubt quite a sophisticated questioning, but it nevertheless remains a re-presentation, which is not what I’m about.

OE: Would somebody like Sherman be part of this? Kruger’s work too is concerned with the critique of media, power, the commodity sign, and so on, but Sherman works more subtly, undermining the masculine, patriarchal assumptions of power. Her work critically engages, if not with the subjectivity of women, then with the place of women in the social and cultural discourse of representation.

YS: I’m an admirer of Cindy Sherman’s work, but again I cannot fully identify with her, not purely because of the differences in experience but in terms of the material limitations of her practice. The spheres of practice that are deliberately embraced are also a political statement.

OE: Let’s move into those spheres: you started as a painter.

YS: Yes.

OE: And you obviously wanted to corrupt painting by moving it away from the Greenbergian idea of a coherent, self-immanent flatness. For you, painting had to be removed from this notion of flatness—from two-dimensionality as a kind of artificial screen on which all kinds of models of thinking can be embedded. So you’ve moved into the sphere of sculpture, with the mannequins and the clothing, which pose interesting questions in relation to gait, gesture, gender, sexuality, camp, and so on. You’ve also moved into the cinematic, via photographs. And in all of this, while you’ve consistently worked with notions of seriality and the index, you’ve also worked with temporality. Can you talk about how these different modes, strategies, and ideas come together to spell out the critical endeavor behind your practice?

YS: I feel strongly that there’s a difference between the politics of representation and the representation of politics. I think the politics of representation and the representation of politics are simultaneously engaged when there seems to be a kind of movement among one’s formal strategies, so that the formal strategies are as political as the content. In other words, if I am not the kind of expressionist artist who is just painting, if I transfer myself into the ideas of masquerade and dressing up and the use of costume and what those mean, there is also a point of engaging with those positions. One thing people never talk about when they discuss my work is the idea of jouissance, or the uses of pleasure. Pleasure is central to my practice, whether in the idea of fetishism or in the tactility of the surfaces. But I think that’s political, because painting, or painting in the context of modernism, is loaded in that it always signifies “pure” art made by the expressive artist in the studio.

OE: So you were moving painting off its pedestal.

YS: Exactly, but then going farther, to work in the area of cinema, popular culture, and also to use camouflage in terms of costume and masquerade—to move into the carnivalesque. I see all of these things because I’ve never separated culture from life, in the sense that the way you present yourself, the kind of camouflage you use, is also the way you are marked stereotypically. I want to engage across all these things, and the movement, or the freedom to move, among these different media serve that purpose quite well.

OE: Let’s talk about specific works, such as the new work Scramble for Africa (Cat. 28). What are the conceptual issues you want to convey?

YS: Scramble for Africa represents a period in the nineteenth century when European trade in Africa, which had been going on prior to this period, became more competi-
Fig. 102 a-b. Diary of a Victorian Dandy, 1998, by Yinka Shonibare. Series of 5 C-prints, 193 x 228.6 cm, Edition 1 of 3. Commissioned by iViVA, Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.
tive, and there was a question of the sharing of the cake—the African resources—among the European powers. It became important to divide up the territory. Of course the effect this had on the local people was of having to be governed by others from the outside, of colonial cultural indoctrination, and of economic appropriation. Underpinning this division was David Livingstone’s slogan of the three C’s—Commerce, Civilization, Christianity. King Leopold of Belgium was the benefactor of that slogan; he was mainly seeking to annex the Congo for economic gain, but he had to frame his annexation of the Congo as a kind of philanthropic idea.

I wanted to create a work addressing this period, not as a commemoration of it but as an imaginary idea locating the significance of the Berlin conference of 1884–85, which divided Africa among five colonial powers. The sculpture is centered around a long conference table, with fourteen figures representing the fourteen countries that participated in the conference. As is customary when I address issues of power, the fourteen figures are headless. They wear Victorian men’s suits made out of “African” printed fabric. I want to produce something signifying both the absurd and the grotesque. It’s a kind of exaggerated representation of a truly grotesque moment in African history, a moment that to me is highly responsible for the state that Africa is in now.

OE: This returns me to the question of diaspora, which I cannot help linking to the social crisis Africa is currently undergoing.

YS: Therein lies the issue of this work, which tries to trace the trauma of diaspora and the roots of that trauma within the African context. Now it would be simplistic to suggest that one can locate the question of diaspora in one single incident—that would be naïve indeed. But I deliberately chose this particular moment as a symbolic one. From this moment comes the expression of the work.

OE: You recently made a photographic tableau based on Oscar Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray (Fig. 101 a-b); then you made a sculpture based on Fragonard’s Swing, another on Gainsborough’s Mr. and Mrs. Andrews. Tell me about your engagement with the “canon” of art.

YS: I think that art of every age is political you know, it’s used as a means of expressing certain things about the society at the time. So Mr. and Mrs. Andrews (Fig.100) involved a representation of property by eighteenth-century aristocrats, who used painting as a way of expressing their social status. It was a time when everyone knew their place, you did not cross the boundaries, and only the rich had this means of expression.

In my abstract work I’m interested in looking at Abstract Expressionism and what it represents in relation to power, which is always at the center of my practice. I’ve looked at a number of eighteenth-century practices in the same way. Fragonard’s
Swing was a frivolous representation, a painting commissioned by a wealthy nobleman to depict his mistress. It was very frivolous indeed, then, except that the luxurious life-style of very wealthy people was always, inevitably, based on slavery or some other kind of exploitation. The people with this life-style could only afford to commission this frivolous artwork through the sweat of others.

OE: I see a connection between The Picture of Dorian Gray and the (2001) television-series version of Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, where there is this interesting moment when the very ill, feverish son of a plantation owner in the Caribbean is almost on the brink of death, in a state of hallucination, and he sees in his room the harrowing, subhuman conditions of the slaves who were working for the benefit of this stately mansion there in England, Mansfield Park. The series, though fictional, opens a window onto the contradictions of empire. But one sees it through a refracted frame of secret drawings. The connection between these two worlds of master and slave becomes unraveled in scenes of the rape of the women on the plantation, the brutality of the overlords in the Caribbean, and the representation, on the other hand, of the tranquility and civilized noble life of the aristocrats in Mansfield Park, far from the squalor of the New World. So is this part of your obsession with Victoriana? Victoriana was a morality play turned into an ethics: a way on the one hand to hide excess and brutality behind a facade, and on the other to expunge the memory of this highly restrictive, repressive morality.

YS: I think you’ve touched on what is central. The same is true of Gainsborough: a contradiction always lies behind the pleasure and excess on the surface. That pleasure and excess are nearly always underpinned by exploitation, but the interesting thing for me is the notion of complicity: I clearly would enjoy the trappings of aristocracy. I cannot morally justify how they come about, but I know I would enjoy them—I consider myself a hedonist. I also don’t believe for one moment that one’s blackness should mean that one should always be on the margins of society, or suffering in some way. This is an important political stance in my practice.

OE: Let’s look at some of the political issues underlying hedonism and representation. It’s almost as if some of your ideas were premised on an excavation of the corrupt moral universe within which representations like the Fragonard are embedded. In which case I ask, are you a moralist? Because that would seem to contradict the political dimension that the work is trying to explicate.

YS: Well, in The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlor (1996-97) (Fig. 103), say, you don’t necessarily know what my position is. I present you simply with a Victorian parlor that has African footballers printed on the wall.

OE: That could also signify labor, the usage of the black body, its commodification—blackness as a sign of brute force.

YS: But I don’t declare whether the Victorian philanthropist was black or white.

OE: You don’t, but given the representations you’ve embedded there, and the objects and props, one would presuppose that.

YS: Yes, but then Diary of a Victorian Dandy (1998) (Fig. 102 a-b) shows a black man at the center of a depiction of the Victorian period. So when we talk about the question of morality it is not so clear . . .

OE: Your ideas of masquerade, hedonism, fantasy, and camouflage come through in Diary of a Victorian Dandy. But the work could also be said to be part of the broader interest that many artists have with fiction. For me what makes the iconography of Diary of a Victorian Dandy so shot through with contradiction is the centrality of the black figure in all these different moments of the day. And what underlies that work is the question of blackness as anathema to that social world.
YS: Without sounding evasive, I don't consider myself a moral artist: I don't think I make resolved or closed statements. My work is read in contradictory ways, sometimes by the same critics, and I enjoy that. I have certain contradictions within myself because of my upbringing, and those contradictions—genuine, nonironic contradictions within my own person—find expression in my practice.

OE: How do you work to resolve them?

YS: I think the value of resolving something is overstated. I don't necessarily think that resolution is what a poet should be seeking.