Featured Review: Yinka Shonibare: Mother and Father Worked Hard So I Can Play

By Jessica Baran
Published on January 18, 2010 at 5:26pm

Yinka Shonibare MBE, b. United Kingdom, 1962; Boy Doing Headstand, 2009; life-size fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax-printed cotton, mixed media: 27 1/2 x 33 x 30 1/2 inches; Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan Gallery, New York.

Placing his signature life-size mannequins, clothed in Dutch wax-printed cotton (otherwise known as "African print"), in the period rooms on the museum's lower level, the notable British-Nigerian conceptual artist re-illuminates these fossilized moments of material history with fresh paradoxes. It is not Shonibare's figures — child-size, eerily static...and guillotined — that are the focal curiosities here, but rather the cultural incoherence of the historic rooms they inhabit. You suddenly notice how the quintessential American, English and French living spaces here are in reality odd collections of cultural artifacts: an ancient Greek krater in a British country manor; Qing dynasty vases and a Russian carpet in a South Carolina parlor. Ethnic authenticity is a fallacy, it seems, and social status a mere material import — validated by stuff made or acquired from any place (and time) other than one's own. The installation's multicultural theme may feel tiredly familiar, but the exhibit succeeds in making its point fresh. Household furnishings never appeared more bizarre. Through March 14 at the Saint Louis Art Museum, 1 Fine Arts Drive (in Forest Park); 314-721-0072 or www.slam.org. Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Sun. (open till 9 p.m. Fri.)