



Wasafiri

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DORIAN GRAY

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In Ovid's telling of the myth of Narcissus, the protagonist was beguiled into an illusion of communication with his reflection

whilst Echo, his would-be lover, was rebuffed and left to pine away into stone. Similarly, in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the eponymous anti-hero is narcissistically obsessed with a youth-preserving portrait, so much so that the woman he casually seduced, Sybil Vane, is driven to suicide through his compassionless neglect of her. Both Narcissus and Dorian Gray were caught up in a web of un-reality where the 'real' and its re-presentation coalesced in a confusing and, ultimately, fatal manner. It is this question of narcissism and the re-presentation of the 'real' that occupies Yinka Shonibare in his recent series of photographs.

Of the twelve photographic images in the series, there are two in particular that explicitly explore narcissism. In the first Shonibare, en-acting the role of Dorian Gray, stares into a mirror in apparent contemplation of his youthful reflection; in the second, the only colour photograph in the series, (see cover), the figure of Gray/Shonibare stares aghast into the same mirror, the narcissism of the earlier portrait having mutated into an apparition of Gothic horror. In both of these images there is a doubling process at work wherein the individual – his original and authentic presence – is not only duplicated but questioned in a process that renders suspect the assurances we usually associate with mirror-images.

This enquiry into the dilemma of the original and its visual re-presentation suggests a starting point for the further disruption of visual and representational certainties: at first glance, for example, Shonibare's photographs would appear to be directly based on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; however, upon closer inspection we realise that they refer not so much to the original text as to a screen adaptation directed by Albert Lewin in 1945. On a formal level, the photographs sequentially unfold the plot of Lewin's adaptation as if they were a story-board re-telling of the film. The method of re-presenting here, in this instance the film of the book, foregrounds the contrivance and

artifice of representational strategies per se. In effect, the original film – itself a re-presentation of literary conventions – is subjected to a similar process whereby the film's mise-en-scène, sentimentalism, and melodramatic acting, is consistently foregrounded as mimesis and artifice.

The second visual disturbance to occur in these photographs is more immediately conspicuous insofar as the presence of Shonibare – a black artist performing a role usually associated with a white, male, Wildean dandy – highlights the elision of, in particular, Victorian visual representations of blackness in any guise other than those aligned with tropes of inferiority and primitiveness. The very stratagems employed by historical representation, in particular literary and photographic ethnography, to maintain racial distinctions are interrupted in a portrayal of blackness that punctures the extensive and yet exclusionary field of historical categorisation.

It is arguable that this series of photographs focuses not so much on the idea that all representation is mimetic but that representations, historical or otherwise, are intrinsically incapable of maintaining any originary or absolute condition. The interplay of fact and fiction, as it did for Narcissus and Dorian Gray, spirals into a form of visual vertigo throughout these photographs; the authoritative status of historical categorisations and our understanding of them are, likewise, destabilised and cross-examined. The act of mimicry, insofar as it doubles the originary figure of authority and investigates the command of the original, inevitably contests any claim on their behalf to a hegemonic status. Imitation and mimicry, in sum, begets not only disturbance in Shonibare's version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also anxiety as to our very understanding of both originality and representational authenticity.

To the extent that it is a question of both authenticity and visual antecedents that concerns Shonibare here, it is appropriate to note that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first conceived by Wilde as a play before being later expanded and published in book form. Shonibare's photographs, already once removed from the text through the prism of Lewin's film, would appear to bring us one step further away from the original and

yet, perhaps, one step closer to the very concerns that preoccupied not only Dorian Gray but Wilde himself: the simulation, that is to say, of socially sanctioned appearances and the multifarious realities and ambiguities that belie them.

Dorian Gray, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, April-May 2001
www.stephenfriedman.com



