



Wasafiri

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Exclusive Interviews
**Courtia Newland
and Jacob Ross
K S Maniam**

Articles

New Locations in African Writing
Postcolonial Children
Yasmine Gooneratne

Poetry

Angus Calder
Amy T Y Lai
E A Markham
John Mateer
Satyendra Srivastava
Virgil Suárez

Fiction

Extract: *Night Calypso*
Keith Jardim *In the Atlantic Field*
S A Afolabi *Monday Morning*

Reviews

Monica Ali *Brick Lane*
Hari Kunzru *The Impressionist*
Fred D'Aguiar *Bloodlines*
Tim Parks *Judge Savage*
*KIN: New Fiction by Black
and Asian Women*
Caryl Phillips
Laura Chrisman *Postcolonial
Contraventions*
Helon Habila *Waiting for an Angel*
The Third Text Reader

Yinka Shonibare Interview

Yinka Shonibare in Conversation

**Anthony
Downey**

Yinka Shonibare first came to widespread attention with the use of Dutch wax fabric in his work. The fabric was first produced in Dutch

Indonesia, subsequently copied and produced by the English, and then sold to West Africa where it became a popular item of clothing. It also became, crucially, a sign of 'authenticity' both in Africa and latterly, with immigration, England. A colonial invention, Dutch wax fabric appears to offer itself as both a fake and yet 'authentic' sign of Africaness; and Shonibare's use of the fabric – questioning as it does the ideal of an 'authentic' identity and simultaneously presenting identity as a 'fabrication' – accentuates this aspect of the material.

The use of fabric, although first associated with his highly allusive paintings, is also a mainstay of Shonibare's installation-based work. In Documenta 11, he presented his phantasmagoric tableau *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002), an investigation into trade, exchange, colonialism, social and sexual intercourse. Having recently produced a broad spectrum of installation-based work, it is perhaps easy to overlook that Shonibare is an accomplished painter and that is where his practice began in the 1980s. More recently, his show 'Play with Me' at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London returned to this abiding preoccupation.

Anthony Downey In your most recent exhibition, 'Play with Me' at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, you installed a series of circular paintings – can you talk a little about the importance of painting to your practice overall?

Yinka Shonibare I actually trained as a painter. I did life drawing and paintings from the figure. When my work became more abstract I started to ask a lot of questions about the form of painting itself; and also my own relationship to Abstract Expressionism. By Abstract Expressionism I mean the work of people like Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. When I was at college, I saw Abstract Expressionism as a sign of 'authority'. I went to places like the Tate Gallery and I remember the Rothko

Room; but of course, given my generation was at college in 1985/86, my relationship to that as a sign of authority was quite complex. It was a time when a lot of feminist artists and artists of the diaspora started to question the 'heroic white male' notion of art. Abstract Expressionism had been in a sense an expression of that notion. What I was trying to do in my own work – because I have a physical disability and I am of Nigerian origin – was to work with the idea of the 'white space' and the 'heroic' male painting so as to interrupt that space and the perception of the 'heroic' by producing fragmented versions of Abstract Expressionist paintings. I took fabrics from Brixton market and used them as a starting point for disrupting these concepts. The fabrics I use are Indonesian-influenced fabrics that the Dutch produced in the nineteenth century for sale to Indonesia. The Indonesians did not like the industrially produced versions and the Dutch later sold them to the West Africans. Hence, the fabrics are now known as 'African' fabrics because they were appropriated and adopted by Africans. So, in a sense, I saw myself as taking something from popular culture – a decorative pattern – and using it for its decorative impact. At the time, a lot of abstract artists actually found it offensive if their work was described as decorative. I remember Howard Hodgkin and one of the things he got most wound up about was that the art world described his work as decorative. In one interview he stated that he found the notion of the decorative in his own work to be offensive. My generation, however, celebrate the use of popular culture and the decorative is one of the things that we seem to incorporate in our work. I certainly saw no 'fight' with the notion of the decorative in my own work; I saw it as a way to interrupt or to challenge a fixed notion of what is 'high art' in painting. So in that sense painting has always been a mainstay of my practice.

AD I was also wondering about the shape of the paintings in 'Play with Me'; they are circular and placed in an apparently random manner as opposed to your early series 'Double Dutch' (1994) which were rectangular and aligned in a grid pattern. Are there differences to be had between the two or are they doing comparatively the same thing?

YS With the new paintings, I felt that the circular forms are visually pleasing but also I could use them to make more informal arrangements on the wall which moves them away from the obvious interrogation of symmetry. I wanted to produce something which is more free and less formal because I felt that in the past I dealt with the issue of symmetry, the 'grid' pattern if you like. This time around, I wanted to produce something which is more playful and in a sense I thought the circles would serve that purpose.

AD Was the break of the grid in 'Play with Me' a countering of the spatial severity to be found in minimalism — just as your use of 'popular' fabrics was intended to critique the 'heroic' aspect of Abstract Expressionism?

YS That's absolutely correct in describing what I was doing there; and that is reflected in other areas of my work, particularly in the installation pieces. There is most certainly a post-minimalist aesthetic in my work and when you look at it, it is certainly not Donald Judd — they are freer than that.

AD There are a considerable amount of objects in the new show — toy helicopters, model tractors, and plastic characters from various TV shows and films — arranged concentrically around the actual paintings. Why did you chose these particular objects and what made you think of using them in the context of the circular paintings?

YS I arrived at that point because I had just come out of doing the show for Documenta 11, and that was a very serious project. I wanted to work with the notion of play and the obvious thing to me was the actual use of toys. I felt with the toys I would be able to convey this notion of play. Luckily for me, I had a thirteen-year-old son — now fourteen — who at the time was throwing out all his toys. This coincided with my own thoughts about toys and I started to think that toys do say a lot about a society, most obviously in terms of gender issues and the kind of toys boys and girls would be expected to play with. It is a sort of conditioning that starts very early, and all the issues we talk about — racism and exclusion, stereotyping — start incredibly early in our lives. So I saw that the toys were a fantastic metaphor for dealing with those issues; and, of course, I like the innocence of the toys. I started to put the different types of toys together and was intrigued by the meaning created by putting two apparently unrelated things side by side. I might put a McDonald's figure next to a military helicopter, for example. I also bought some fabric at Brixton market with a Euro sign on it and then I went Hamley's toy store and bought this toy, an American fighter helicopter. When I put them both together, they created a complex tension in terms of current global politics. I didn't set out to be overtly political with that piece but of course the reading turned out to be political and people thought I was making some comment on the war in Iraq. However, it was first a formal issue: I liked the circular shape of the propellers against the circular shape of the Euro sign. I also found the pun 'Toy Paintings' amusing — given that I take ready-made fabrics that are 'not

authentic' — because of the suggestion that the paintings are not actually 'real' or 'authentic' but 'toy' paintings. Again, a lucky coincidence, and I want to develop that series further.

AD Bearing in mind your use of objects, I was particularly interested in your installations, primarily those involving mannequins and other objects, and the marked emphasis on 'theatricality' — lighting, tailoring, staging — in these installations. Can you talk a little bit about this notion of 'staging an event', or creating a fiction, and its significance in these tableaux.

YS I started from the position that identity is essentially a construct and within my own art I don't want to do realism: in other words, I'm suggesting that I want the artifice of my work to be visible, to be apparent. The notion of artificiality, or artifice, subsequently became central to my own installation strategy. I suppose you could actually describe me as a 'liar' or a person not telling the truth but who wants the fact that they are not truthful to be visible. I consider the idea of myself as an artist in terms of being a trickster or a tale-teller — the constructed, staged event of my installation is very much an expression of this sort of thinking. This is about taking your audience to a different place, an imaginative place, and the way I make my installations is similar to how I construct my paintings: they are both an attempt to reach the notion of constructed excess and constructed fantasy.

AD Was this notion of tale-telling or artifice central to your Documenta 11 installation *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002)?

YS Whilst preparing for that show, I came across a number of books about the grand tour. One was called *Ladies of the Grand Tour* and the other I can't quite remember right now. Both books were about the life of eighteenth-century aristocracy and the idea of travel, specifically young men going abroad to places like Venice, Rome and other parts of Italy. The idea was to make them more cultured but what actually happened was that for the young men, in particular, it was a way of discovering a lot of things sexually. This eighteenth-century phenomenon made me think about the notion of contemporary sexuality; the way power operates between those who offer sexual services and the people who buy them. Today, we have sex tourism, and different holiday resorts that cater for such tourists.

AD What is the significance of your figures being headless?

YS I first started to make headless people because I did not want to racialise my figures. I wanted them to be more complex figures; and at the same time there was a kind of joke about the French Revolution and the aristocracy with their heads being taken off. In the Documenta 11 installation I was able to pull together all the different aspects: the theatricality, the excess of the costumes, the politics of power, the power relations between the wealthy and non-wealthy, and the issues that have been present in postcolonial debates for the past few years.



Line Painting

But I did not want to do a 'theory' of art; I wanted to do art, to do artifice, and to do 'pleasure'. I also wanted to present the paradox of people who are headless on the one hand but they are having sex. The most outrageous thing is the carriage suspended from the ceiling; alongside the whole impossibility of an installation of headless people having sex, you have the impossibility of a carriage which defies gravity. There is also the impossibility of the most beautiful eighteenth-century costumes being made out of 'African' fabrics.

AD On the subject of 'fabrics' – and the connection between 'fabric' and 'fabrication' is becoming more obvious here – I recently read an essay by Okwui Enwezor, who argues: 'For Shonibare the context of its [Dutch wax fabric] use and presentation both hide and reveal the itinerary of the textile as a by-product of various colonial transactions, beginning with its exportation from Indonesia to Holland to its final appropriation and redeployment in Africa in the early to mid 19th century.' I understand the use of fabric in your work as the presentation of identity as a state of inauthentic 'authenticity' – would you agree with that reading of identity?

YS I feel very strongly that identities have to be constructed because of the nature of them. Identity always requires a relationship to others and cannot exist in isolation; that relationship, in turn, is always constructed by your own relationship to others and that is always some kind of a fiction. It is the 'fiction' that creates an 'imagined community' and I don't deny the use or value in creating a community in itself. It has always been a kind of survival strategy for various groups, from African Americans to women, to the notion of a gay community. Identity formation in this sense is a defensive construct. I don't believe that there is such a thing as an innate or intrinsic identity and I am very sceptical of fixed notions of identity that seems to be a way to group different races together.

AD This brings us to the notion of 'difference' in your work and how it operates as a trope. I want to suggest that 'difference' in the schema of the globalised art world often functions on the level of the ethnic and exotic otherness – the palatable, commodifiable sign of difference that circulates as a legitimate sign of otherness. It seems to me that the play on difference – the scepticism shown towards the idea of 'authentic' identity – in your work disavows this demand that the 'ethnic' artist proclaim their 'difference' on their sleeve, so to speak. Is this how you see it?

YS Contemporary art has historically thrived on the notion of differences – the notion of bringing something new into the modernist debate. It goes as far back as Picasso's use of African imagery to reshape or reform modernism. The interesting thing is what happened post-1968, when there were huge demonstrations at the MOMA against the concept of the inherent hierarchies in contemporary art. It was around that time that people started to really challenge the notion of the establishment. When certain groups realised that they did not

have a voice within the mainstream of art they decided to use their own identity as a vehicle to challenge the system. I am thinking here of artists such as Judy Chicago, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman. It then became a cliché as artists like Kruger, Sherman and Basquait entered into the mainstream marketplace; but people felt that the only way they could make progress was to market their own 'differences'. The notion of the 'other' has also always been a fascination for the art world and artists who felt neglected began to focus on the part of their work that sells to a gap in the market. I don't find anything particularly wrong with that as long as it is done knowingly and critically. As for my own example: I find that as a black artist if you produce work that is not about being black then you are spoken of as the black artist who *doesn't* make works of art about being black and then if I do, you are the black artist who *only* makes work about being black. It is a kind catch 22 situation. What I do is to actually confront the issue directly in a space where one is visible racially, then there is no escape from the issue.

AD You have spoken before about excess as a strategy: 'Excess is the only legitimate means of subversion'. What do you mean by this?

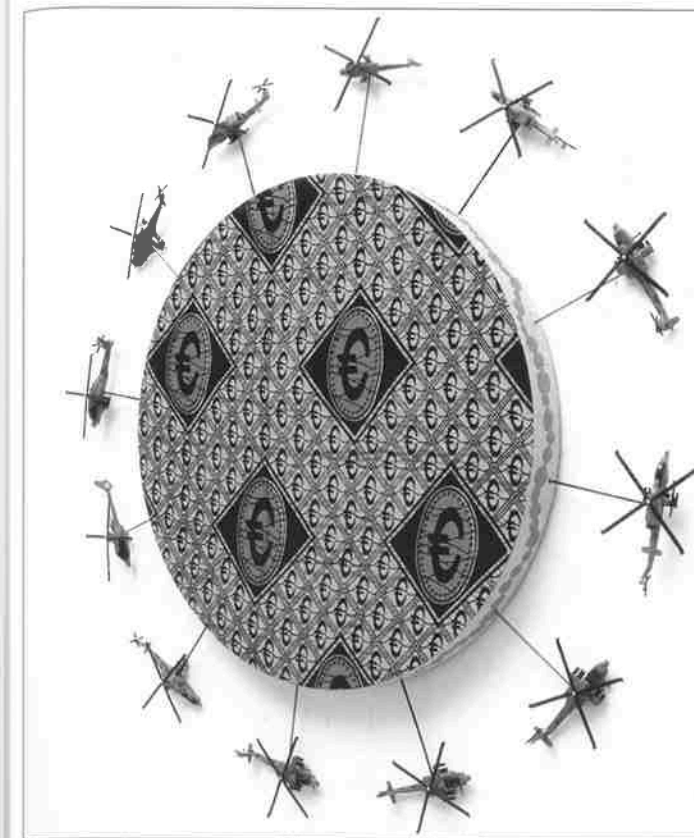
YS I feel that to really make a point, or to challenge people, you have to be exaggerative in your gestures if you want to be noticed. The notion of comedy or parody is linked to excessive gestures: the comedian is excessive in his gestures – always beyond reality, so to speak. If you want to engage people, you have to go beyond reality and put your concerns in a completely different realm. I have always viewed art as a form of opera, or as being operatic, and opera is excessive; it is beyond the real, and therefore hyper-real. This returns us to the notion of my not wanting to do realism in my work as such.

AD Is humour a part of this operatic excess?

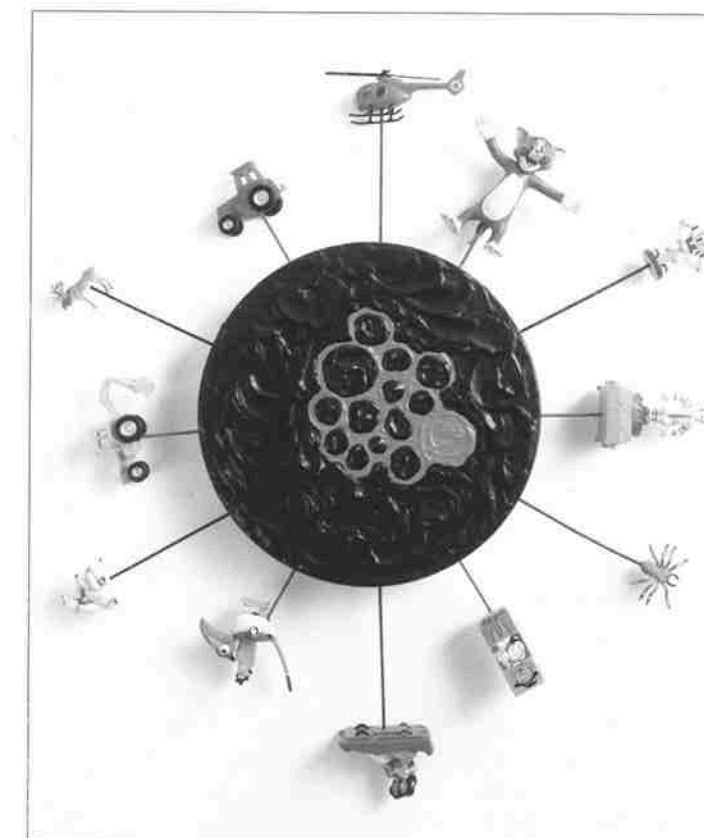
YS Yes, most certainly. If you take the notion of the trickster: his humour is a type you cannot actually place but it is always politically astute. I am not talking here of the passive clown, but something more dangerous than that. You may begin by laughing but the more you think about it, the more you realise that this is not merely comedy. The first attraction of humour is on the seductive level, it seduces you. I consider my work successful when it manages to seduce to begin with and then slowly gives way to a realisation that it's a bittersweet kind of seduction. There is always something else behind that humour – an excess.

AD Does the notion of 'excess' tie in with your adaptation of the notion of the dandy – an excessive and sometimes threatening figure in terms of gesture and demeanour – in works such as *Dorian Gray* (2001) and *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998)?

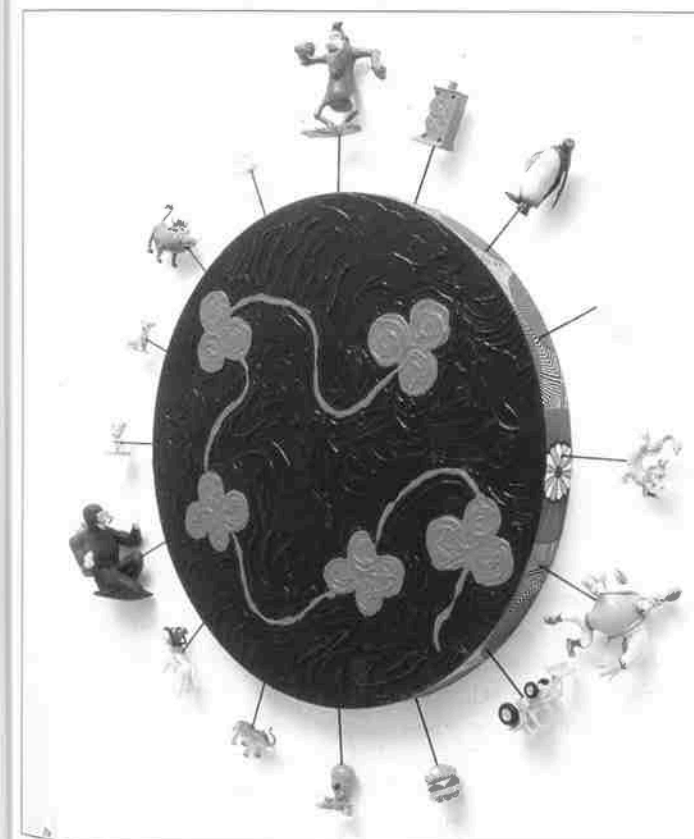
YS Yes, what I like most about the concept of the dandy is that it is the masquerade par excellence. It is a disguise where you appear to be a member of the aristocracy but you are always on the outside. There is also the sense that you are never a copy of



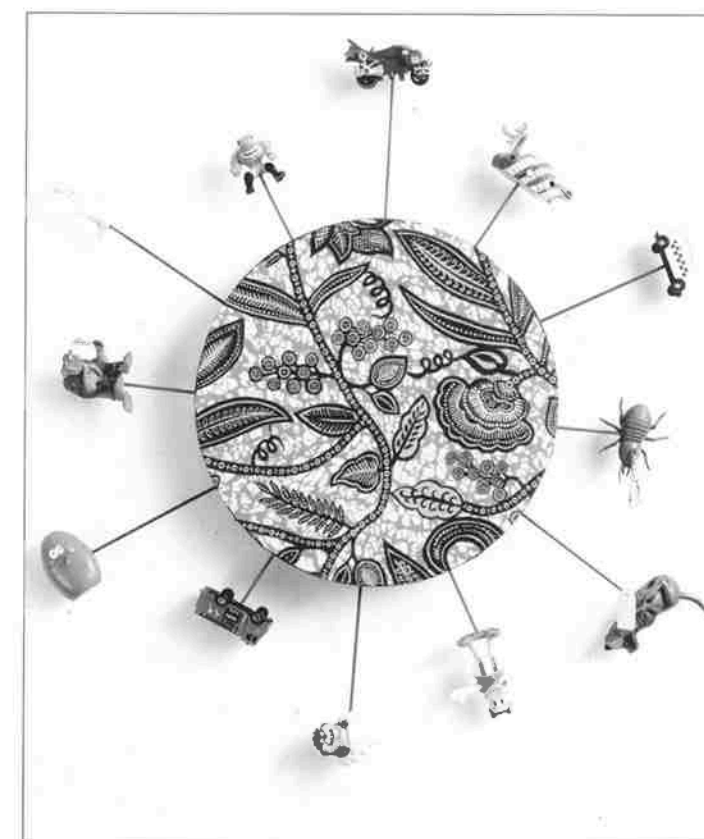
Toy Painting 9



Toy Painting 3



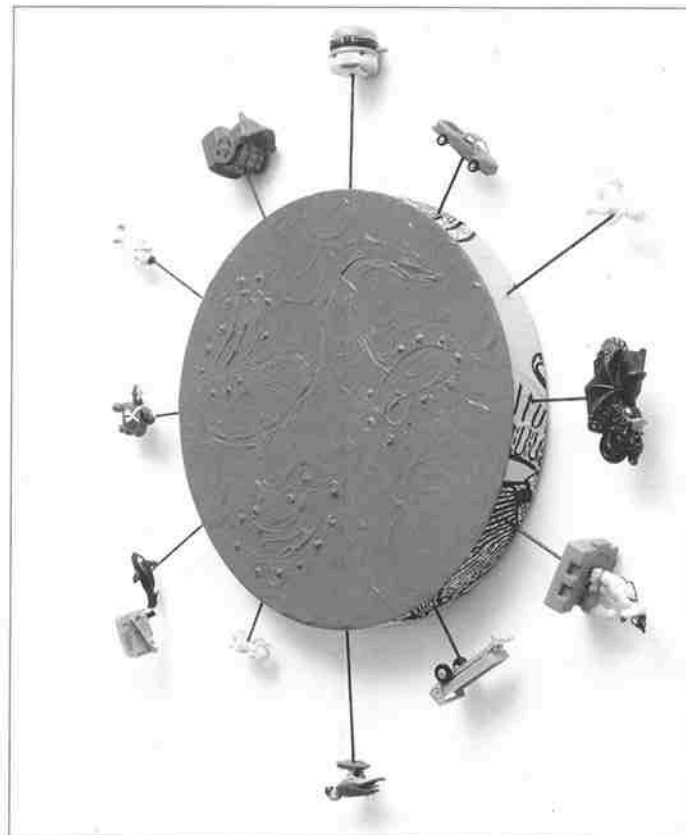
Toy Painting 1



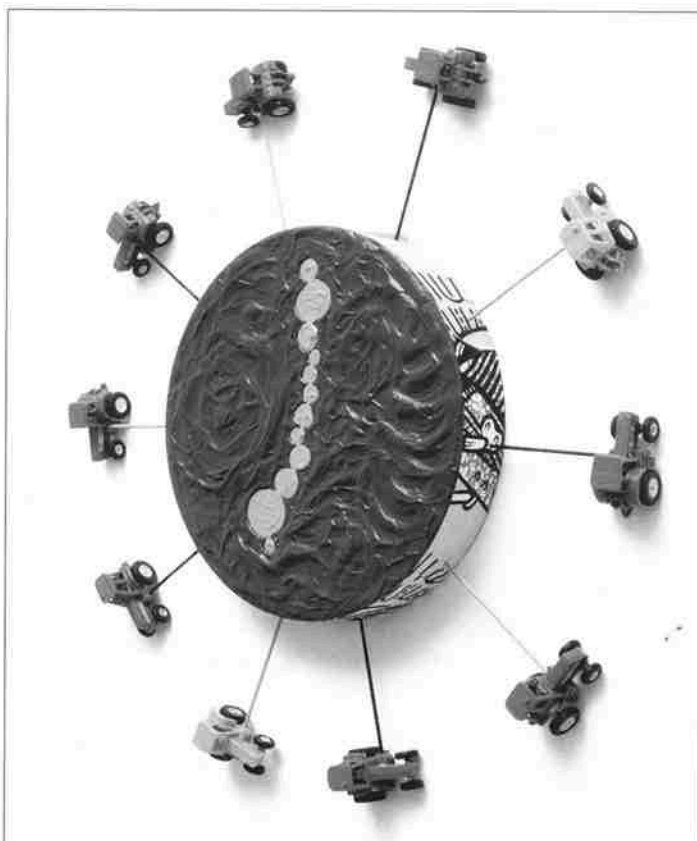
Toy Painting 10



Toy Painting 6



Toy Painting 5



Toy Painting 4

what you parody, there is always a level which is beyond or excessive. Oscar Wilde's parody of the English and the aristocracy, for example, was more English than the English. The dandy's practice takes something that you are supposed to be outside of and re-appropriates it for a different use: to be subversive and challenge the establishment.

AD Finally, could you talk a little bit about projects you are working on presently?

YS I don't know if this has actually been written about in relation to my work but I want to be political formally. I want to feel free to be able to move through forms in my own practice. Form for me is just simply a way of expressing a certain type of thought. Part of that strategy is moving from being a painter to working with installation, to working with photography; the obvious thing I would want to explore now is film, and my next project uses film. I cannot talk so much about the project because I am in the process of developing it. Apart from that I will début at the James Cohan Gallery in New York in 2005, then I am going to go into the Cooper Hewitt collection in New York and rearrange it. I will probably link that somehow with my show. They are both in 2005 but the film will be made in Stockholm in 2004.

This interview took place on 20th January 2004. With thanks to Vanessa Corbera for the transcription.

All work emulsion acrylic on textile, 2003