PRESTEL

SETTING THE STAGE

Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey

ANTHONY DOWNEY: I have always been particularly interested in *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996–97, pp. 181, 182–83), the most notable aspect of which is that everything is covered with Dutch wax fabric. Can you elaborate upon why you chose that specific material?

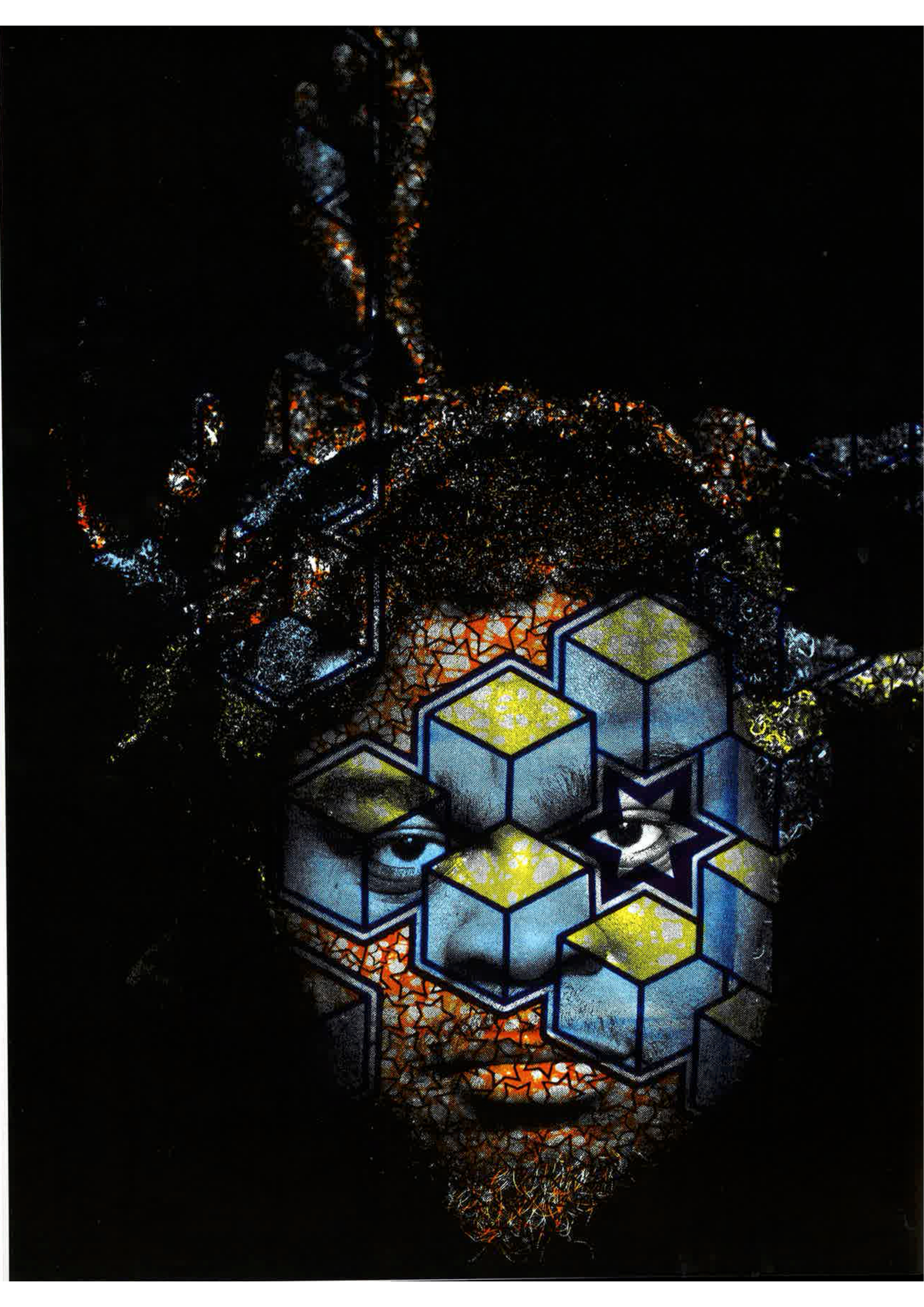
YINKA SHONIBARE: The fabrics are signifiers, if you like, of "Africanness" insofar as when people first view the fabric, they think of Africa. When I was at college in London, my work was very political. I was making work about the emergence of perestroika in the then Soviet Union, and I was also quite intrigued by the idea of the Cold War coming to an end. However, my tutor, upon seeing this work, said to me: "You are African, aren't you; why don't you make authentic African art?" I was quite taken aback by this, but it was through the process of thinking about authenticity that I started to wonder about what the signifiers of such "authentic" Africanness would look like. The fabrics, in this context, happen to be the one obvious thing that people think of when they think about Africa, so I went to Brixton Market where the fabrics are sold. I started to speak to people who sold them and they told me that they were influenced by Indonesian batiks that the Dutch had later mass-produced. The intention was to sell these mass-produced batiks back to the Indonesians but, for largely political and cultural reasons, the Indonesians wanted to promote their own locally produced and better-quality batiks. So the industrially produced versions were largely sold in West Africa in the nineteenth century where they subsequently became very popular, and today they are seen as a signifier of Africa. It was with this in mind that I started to explore precisely what was meant by authentic in the context of Africa.

Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Self-Portrait (after Warhol) 1* (detail), 2013. Unique screen print, digital print, hand-painted linen; 134.5 x 134 cm. Collection of George and Margot Grieg

AD: The other notable aspect of *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* is that it references the Victorian period (ca. 1830–90), as does a significant amount of your work. Why is the Victorian period such an important point of reference for your work?

YS: Let me begin to answer that question by noting that I am an African speaking English to you. The reason for that is because of the colonial period, empire building, and the British encounter with Africa. The Victorian era in Africa coincided with the height of the British Empire, so there are historical reasons for my interest in the period and its legacy in Africa. There are also more immediate reasons: in the 1980s the then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, started to talk about Victorian values. My first instinct upon hearing these comments was to flee or run from this idea of Victoriana because it seemed so repressed and so far away from me. But then, on the other hand, I thought it would be ironic to play with precisely that notion of Victorian "values." There was a way of subverting that idea of the historical authority of the Victorian period by appropriating it or being complicit with it. As for the idea behind *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour*, it is relatively simple: the philanthropist wants to help the less fortunate; however, in this opulent environment of the parlor, where he has decorated his walls with images of black footballers, there will always be a relationship of patronage—or, if you like, a relationship between the "haves," the colonial philanthropist, and the so-called have-nots, the poor colonials. Philanthropy is more about dominance in the colonial context that it is about altruism; it is more of a condescending idea where the power relationship is never equal.

AD: This is interesting insofar as your work would appear not only to deconstruct notions of so-called authentic African



signifiers but also the notion of Victorian values and the legacy of the Victorian period in contemporary politics and culture.

YS: Yes, I agree. I am very interested in that legacy, and being a Londoner moving around the city of London, you quickly begin to realize that the buildings you see—from the Tate to the National Gallery to Lloyd's insurance offices, not to mention the entire banking system of this country—were based firstly on the trade in slaves and thereafter on forms of inequitable trading practices. And, of course, there has always been a relationship between Europe and Africa; and the maintenance of a so-called developed and civilized Europe through these various institutions is underpinned by an uneven relationship with the less fortunate—not unlike the practice of Victorian philanthropy.

AD: In the context of trade or exchange, there is also a cultural dimension that you draw upon: the trade in ideas, for example. And as much as your work looks at colonial history, the legacy of slavery, and the aftermath of imperialism, it also looks at Western art history for its sources. I am thinking here of works such as *The Swing (after Fragonard)* (2001, pp. 168, 69) which is now actually part of the Tate's collection in London. What attracted you to Fragonard?

YS: I was drawn to Fragonard because—like the Victorian period—it is one of the references you would least expect. Although I cannot recall my first actual encounter with Fragonard, it seems to have been there forever; it was an iconic art historical image. More specifically, I like the frivolity of the image and the wild abandon of the lady on the swing. I wanted to reference frivolity over profundity, but in choosing frivolity I wanted to make a comment on profundity itself. This reply might need a more immediate historical reference inasmuch as the generation working before me, the so-called Black Art Movement that included Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper, was dealing with a lot of really important political issues but in a largely serious way that some people have described as being didactic. I wanted to come to things from a different angle and look at the notion of frivolity and playfulness; however, my playfulness has an inverted form of politics underlining it. Being a black artist looking at frivolity and playfulness is the least expected thing I could do—and that has a political resonance in light of the history of black artists working in Britain. I think this is why I accepted an MBE [Member of the Order of the British Empire] when it was offered: it was the last thing you would have expected of me and it also sets up a series of expectations of behalf of others about who I am and what I do—expectations that, I hope, are being constantly put into question by my work.

AD: This point references further issues. Firstly, Fragonard is widely viewed as part of the Rococo movement, which critics then viewed in derogative terms as both frivolous and merely fashionable. And there has always been a dichotomy in art history between frivolity, fashionability, decoration, and the apparent profundity of high art. It seems to me that you play with this in a way that disarms the viewer.

YS: Looking back to art history for images is central to my work insofar as it often yields unexpected images and resonances. If we look at another of my works, *Reverend on Ice* (2005, fig. 5, pp. 64–65, 150–51), which is after Henry Raeburn's *Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch* (ca. 1795, fig. 6), you get some sense of both this frivolity and seriousness. In the original painting, the reverend is both a "man of the cloth," a reverend, and a "man of the book." He is a serious chap and to be respected. And yet this painting has caught him in a moment of frivolity and playfulness—a moment when he thinks no one else is looking at him and he can be a bit naughty. It is the last thing we would expect from him, this joyousness and our catching him in the act of being joyful. I also like the play on words in the title, *Reverend on Ice*, which gives a sense of the reverend being frozen in time and space, or being "kept on ice" for this one surprising outing.

AD: It is almost as if we, too, have come across him unexpectedly, and this is the last thing we are expecting from him, this most frivolous of gestures.

YS: Yes, he is indeed a very irreverent reverend!

AD: Let's further explore this notion of irreverence here as it seems important in your work.

YS: It was certainly the twin poles of irreverence and reverence that drew me to the original painting, and with a lot of the references that I use there is a degree of both reverence and irreverence on my part. If I work with a Thomas Gainsborough painting such as *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (ca. 1750, fig. 3), then

that painting historically stands for something, and in using it in my work *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without Their Heads* (1998, p. 178), I am appropriating a degree of its power while at the same time offering up a critique of it. In the contemporary world, Gainsborough's painting is an anachronism of sorts insofar as a man stands next to his belongings, in this case his wife, dog, and gun—in no particular order—and displays the extent of his land ownership in the background. The view of his estate in the background indicates a society where reverence, if not deference, is absolute. This painting is first and foremost a celebration of deference, and I want to deflate that somehow. I think I achieve that by beheading them, which is an allusion to the French Revolution and the beheading of the French landed gentry and aristocracy. It amused me to explore the possibility of bringing back the guillotine in the late 1990s, not for use on people, of course—my figures are mannequins—but for use on the historical icons of power and deference.

AD: In adopting that iconic image of Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews,* there would appear to be a form of complicity with the power of the image but also a very irreverent take on that image, too, which brings us back to your practice as an artist of adopting the iconography of power to deconstruct power itself. In a show in 2007 you were invited to display your work in the hallowed halls of the National Gallery in London—becoming in turn one of the few living artists to have been extended such an honor. Could you talk a little bit more about how you felt about being invited into such a venerable establishment, which houses, among other works, Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*?

YS: That was an interesting experience for sure. I later heard that when my show opened, some of the board members refused to come to the opening because they felt very strongly that the National Gallery is not a place for contemporary art. As for my work being placed in that context, the curators looked for works within their collection that had a relationship to the slave trade—bearing in mind that 2007 was the bicentenary anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade—and asked me to engage with them. They found two portraits, one of Colonel Tarleton and the other of Mrs. Oswald, both of whom had had connections to the slave trade. These works were removed and I put my work *Colonel Tarleton and Mrs. Oswald Shooting* (2007, pp. 130–31, 132–33) in their place. Both are life-size mannequins, dressed in Georgian outfits made of Dutch wax fabric, and both have just blown apart an unfortunate pheasant—an activity that relates to their social status and the leisured classes. The part of the gallery where the work was placed is a very busy part. It acts as a center point, so I decided to do an installation that would happen above people's heads, where it could be seen by all. The fact that they are shooting a pheasant that has exploded "blood" on people's heads also gives it a comic element, which would have no doubt further displeased some of the National Gallery board who had objected to it in the first place.

AD: It would seem that quite a number of your chosen subjects are actively engaged, so to speak, in leisure pursuits. I am also thinking here of *Leisure Lady (with Ocelots)* (2001, p. 170) and *Hound* (2000, p. 172).

YS: Yes, that is obviously intentional. To be in a position to engage in leisure pursuits, you need a few bob. You cannot be a peasant and be off shooting for a day because you would have had work to do. You need spare time and money buys you spare time. While the leisure pursuit might look frivolous—we are back to that word again—my depiction of it is a way of engaging with that power. It is actually an expression of something much more profoundly serious insofar as the accumulation of wealth and power that is personified in leisure was no doubt a product of exploiting other people.

AD: It also appears that leisure may lead to a degree of ennui if not the breakdown of social order on behalf of the so-called leisured classes; a degree of dysfunctionality that results in the scenario represented in *How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once (Ladies)* (2006, p. 143), in which two individuals literally blow each other's head off.

YS: *How to Blow Up Two Heads at Once* is the perfect duel with a 100 percent result because these two Victorians simultaneously shoot each other's head off and guarantee a form of Mutually Assured Destruction [MAD]. The work was in part a reaction to the world we live in today. We are living in a post-9/11 environment that has recently seen war in Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq, and what it has came down to in popular cultural and political terms is the pitching on one side of the Americans and on the other side militant Muslims. This seems reductive to me and this work may initially appear humorous and perhaps frivolous, but it is examining

the pointlessness of conflict in general. It is not just about the Iraq War but an opportunity to think about what happens when conflict turns to violence: you literally blow each other's heads off because no one actually comes out of a war a winner, not even the victor.

AD: One of the things that strikes me about all of these works is their sheer unabashed theatricality and their frieze-like appearance. Each has a centralized narrative that appears to be suspended in time. I am thinking here of *Scramble for Africa* (2003, pp. 26, 154–55, 156, 157), which draws upon the mise-en-scène of colonial history and visualizes it as if on a stage of sorts.

YS: Theatricality is certainly a device in my work. It is a way of setting the stage; it is also a fiction—a hyperreal, theatrical device that enables you to reimagine events from history. There is no obligation to truth in such a setting, so you have the leeway to create fiction or to dream. *Scramble for Africa* examines how history repeats itself, and when I was making it I was really thinking about American imperialism and the need in the West for resources such as oil, and how this preempts the annexation of different parts of the world. This is what happened in the 1880s with Africa, which was carved up arbitrarily by European powers. I thought about a historical equivalent for what is happening today, and that historical equivalent was the so-called Scramble for Africa, whereby a conference in Berlin (1884–85), attended by the then European superpowers, decided which Europeans could trade in Africa and who would get which territory. *Scramble for Africa* is about people having a conference about a continent that was not theirs and deciding how they are going to divide it up without any form of consultation with those who would be most affected—the Africans.

AD: The strangeness of the image also appeals to me—fourteen headless men sitting around a table with a contested map of Africa on it. I first saw this piece in a room at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London and it was not easily forgotten. I found this strangeness in another of your works, *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002, pp. 158–59, 160, 161, 162–63), when I first saw it in Documenta 11. I was initially intrigued by the impossibility of it all, which you have mentioned in previous conversations: the impossibility of headless people having sex, for example, or the impossibility of eighteenth-century costumes made of African fabric.

YS: I enjoy presenting "impossibility," but the reality of *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* is more concerned with power relationships and how the exploitation of Africa had a counterpart of sorts in the Grand Tour—the latter being an original form of tourism that was popular from the mid-seventeenth century onwards and which mostly involved the upper classes traveling to Venice and Rome for reasons of "improvement." The Grand Tour was also a form of sex tourism that belied the cultural tone of its apparent purpose. This is also about power; you could relate it to the present-day relationship between the so-called first world and third world. I am thinking here about people making trips to Thailand and elsewhere for the purpose of having sex; that is a power relationship that finds expression in sexuality. Although I read books such as *Ladies of the Grand Tour* (2001), I made up the title myself: criminal conversation is what people used to be accused of if they committed adultery in the eighteenth century.

AD: I was also thinking here of the sheer excessiveness of the work—there is a lot of it and it is very theatrical in its excess. There is, for one, a full-sized carriage floating over the scene.

YS: Excess generates its own reactions and forms of critique that are not immediately apparent. When you think about Africa and about being an African artist, people most likely think about poverty and political struggle; they also think about independence and civil rights. None of those things actually sit well with the ideas of frivolity or excess, and so this returns us to notions of the unexpected. It is saying, "Look, I'm not going to be where you expect me to be, I'm not going to play victim, and I'm not going to play nature to your culture"—the last phrase is a reference to Barbara Kruger's work *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture* (1983) and the possibility of adopting a stance that questions not only the status quo but your own assumptions about that status quo.

AD: And this brings us back to the sense of unexpectedness in your work, in terms of its sources, the way it is presented, and the positions you take in relation to historical and contemporary events. One of the other unexpected angles to your work is the fact that you started out as a painter and periodically return to that form.

YS: Yes, I did start off as a painter and it is something I still do. There is the tactile aspect to it and the use of materials.

There are also the two opposing forces of decoration and abstraction, which reflect the history of modernism and Greenbergian notions of what painting was supposed to be. I try to marry those two things in the kind of paintings I have chosen to do, which are neither just decorative nor just abstract—they are both. They also play with the idea of the Minimalist grid, so that the rigid structure is played within a manner that is very much Postminimalist.

AD: You have also referenced people like Rothko and that motif of the heroic white male—to what extent is a painting such as *Deep Blue* (1997, p. 201) engaging with that legacy?

YS: In a purely physical way, and bearing in mind I have a disability, it is much easier for me to paint things that are broken down into smaller pieces. And so rather than actually trying to make some heroic large painting, what I do is fragment that heroism by reducing it to smaller manageable chunks.

AD: Which is, in certain ways, a complicity with art history, an adoption of certain codes and the authority associated with those codes in order to disrupt them—not unlike your use of Gainsborough's *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*.

YS: Yes, you could put it that way.

AD: I am also interested here in the way you have adopted and adapted the code of the dandy in your work, a figure that returns us to the Victorian period but also—in its soi-disant demeanor and display of wit—a somewhat excessive and unexpected figure. I am thinking here of *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998, pp. 218–19) and *Dorian Gray* (2001, pp. 216, 217).

YS: Historically, the dandy is usually an outsider whose only way in is through his wit and his style. Coming from a middle-class background, the dandy aspired to aristocratic standing so as to distinguish himself from both the lower and middle classes. In this sense, his frivolous lifestyle is a political gesture of sorts, containing within it a form of social mobility. Needless to say, Oscar Wilde is a good example of the dandy, and he played that role well; he used his wit and his style to progress within English society and was brutally penalized in the end for his apparent frivolity. His apparent lack of seriousness, of course, belied an absolute seriousness, and that attracts me to the dandy as a figure of mobility who upsets the social order of things. As a black man living in the UK, I find myself in a position where I am not so-called upper class; however, in Nigeria I would be considered upper class. And this got me thinking about social and class mobility in the context of the dandy. The dandy can remake himself again and again; he can do that through the image, he can remake his own image and thereafter re-create and remake himself.

AD: I was reminded of two quotes here, one from Oscar Wilde, whom you just mentioned, and his notion that "One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art," and one from Charles Baudelaire, who wrote that "the dandy is one who elevates aesthetics into a living religion." Again, just as the figure of the dandy alluded to a politics of sorts, aesthetics always has a political context; the adoption of clothing, for example, being the means to go beyond one's allotted class in a time where such mobility was rigorously policed. To identify with such a figure would suggest an inclination toward role-playing for political purposes and an intention to disrupt certain accepted ways of seeing things—would you agree with that?

YS: All identity construction is a form of reenactment. You are playing a role and to do so you have to construct that role. The dandy is a figure who not only lives out this fact but he is also both an insider and an outsider who disrupts such distinctions. When *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* was first shown, it was in the London Underground and the audience for that was in excess of three million people. Again, the sheer unexpectedness of this image had a huge impact. The organization that commissioned the piece, InIVA [Institute of International Visual Arts], did a survey where they asked people who they thought the character in the photographs was. And some people either imagined that he was a real Victorian character who existed, and some people thought that they were posters for a film. I enjoyed that open-endedness and the disruptiveness in the display of the image insofar as it already depicted a figure, the dandy, who is a sign of disruption.

AD: These images could be seen in terms of visual disruption, an unexpected image, but could they also be seen as a moment of historical revisionism—a moment of going back in time and pointing out that Victorian society was not as monocultural as we think it was?

YS: I would not necessarily go with that reading because I do not really go for that kind of revisionism; for me, that would come across as merely illustrative and it is more about disruption and unexpectedness. It is not about expressing something that once existed but that people did not know about. The images in *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* are fakes—it is pure theater and it is Yinka Shonibare in that picture, not some obscure historical character. It is a contemporary person doing this and it is playing with this idea of making people look twice and re-engage in what they are looking at.

AD: Let's take this notion of fakery further. I was reminded just now of a quote from an interview of yours from some years back in which you said, "To be an artist, you have to be a good liar."

YS: I think that sometimes people have a problem distinguishing artifice from so-called reality. Artifice is not reality; they are two different things and I think that once that is understood you can perhaps read into the work of the artist a bit better. For me it is about providing people with alternative possibilities and that sometimes requires the device of the lie.

AD: Which brings us to another aspect of your work, your use of film—often seen in terms of artifice and alternative realities—in works such as *Un Ballo in Maschera* (*A Masked Ball*) (2004, pp. 226–27) and *Odile and Odette* (2005, pp. 224, 225). What has film enabled you to do that you cannot do in, say, painting and sculpture?

YS: In the most basic sense, it has allowed me to explore movement. There is an aesthetic quality with movement and the resonance of the image that you cannot get when it is presented as a still image. There is also the sense of repetition and, in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, for example, I did not want to make a film with a beginning, middle, and end; instead, I wanted to explore the reflexivity of the film and how it reflects back on itself.

AD: Which recalls the films of the French New Wave period.

YS: Yes, very much so, and I am thinking here of Jean-Luc Godard's works and in particular Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), which is a film that had a great influence on me because of the way it consistently draws the viewer back to the filmic moment and refers to the fact that it is a film and not a reality in itself. It also does this with its repetitive, almost incomprehensible, structure and plot and the blurring of the distinction between truth and fiction, artifice and fact. It is a very modernist approach, I guess, and in *Un Ballo in Maschera* I use devices such as repetition to draw attention to the filmic nature of what we are seeing.

AD: Could you describe that a little bit more, because the film examines a relatively obscure event—that is, the assassination at a masked ball of the Swedish King Gustav III in 1792.

YS: In the 1780s and '90s, Gustav III was attempting to expand Sweden's borders into Russia. These attempts were not only costly and divisive but drew attention away from poverty at home and his own extravagances. One of Gustav III's major preoccupations was going to the ball, another frivolity, I guess, and I thought of this as a metaphor for the kind of imperialist figure who, like in Rome before, is "fiddling" while the seat of empire is burning. However, things are of course more complicated than that inasmuch as he was also a great patron of the arts. In the film, and this returns us to the formal devices mentioned above in relation to the French New Wave, I use repetition and open-ended narratives to suggest alternative readings. In one, he dies as a result of the assassination; in the other, he lives. And the narrative repeats itself so it is not closed by any means; rather, it is open-ended and the outcome depends on where the audience wants to stop viewing it or indeed how they want to view it. If you stop viewing after his assassination you do not see him rise up again and the whole thing start over again.

AD: This notion of repetition, in part, brings us to your second film, *Odile and Odette*, which is taken from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (1875–76). Could you describe what attracted you to *Swan Lake* and, in particular, what attracted you to the relationship between Odile and Odette?

YS: This film is more about doubling than repetition. In the original story, Odile is Von Rothbart the magician's daughter and Odette is the beautiful swan that Prince Siegfried has promised to marry. Siegfried and Odette have an agreement between them that they would stay faithful, but Von Rothbart dresses his daughter Odile—who bears an uncanny resemblance to Odette—to trick Siegfried into kissing her at a ball at the palace. Odette sees this and their union is broken

forever. There are a number of endings, one involving Siegfried throwing himself from the castle ramparts when he realizes his mistake, whereas another has Odette do the same thing after she has seen Siegfried kiss Odile. What interested me most here is that when the ballet is performed, it is usual that the two roles of Odette and Odile are danced by one performer. Odile is usually in black, signifying a certain malign intent, while Odette is traditionally in white. In my version of the ballet I have used two dancers, one black and one white, and composed them so they appear to be mirror reflections of one another. They synchronize each other's movements in a framed "mirror" to give the impression that it is a mirror we are looking at. The idea is that one woman is the reflection of the other woman, so that although you are seeing two different ballerinas, essentially you are seeing one person.

AD: It seems that *Odile and Odette* personifies precisely what you said earlier in relation to the medium of film giving you the ability to look at movement and the ambiguities of narrative and time with the context of film itself.

YS: Yes, very much so; it is difficult to fully portray that in painting and sculpture.

AD: Your most recent work went back further than the Victorian age to a time broadly commensurate with the Enlightenment period and the high-water mark of European reason and rationality. In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (2008, fig. 13, pp. 210–11, 212, 213), you have produced a series of photographs after Goya's series of etchings *Los Caprichos*, which he produced in the 1790s (see fig. 14), but there is also a broader reference to the figure of Caliban, who figures prominently in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (ca. 1610–11).

YS: The Enlightenment period is a time of being liberated from the Dark Ages, from the shackles of tradition into the empirical methods of science and rationality. Our traditional notions of democracy were refined in this period and emerged in the Age of Enlightenment alongside the ideals of liberalism. However, it is precisely the arrogance of liberal democracy that has been used as a justification for a number of wars and, most recently, the war in Iraq. The appeal to a transcendentalist notion of democracy has effectively presaged an unjust war. The arguments are familiar from a colonial period: they, the other, are an "uncivilized" people and we, enlightened Europeans that we apparently are, will endeavor to enlighten them. However, like Caliban in *The Tempest*, they refuse to be enlightened so we will force democracy upon them by the gun. This act is irrational in itself: the arrogance of liberal democracy has led to the most irrational acts of genocide. In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, I have taken the text from Goya's original aquatint prints and their formal composition. I have turned the original statement, reproduced on the desk where a figure sleeps, and put a question mark after it so that it reads in French, "The sleep of reason produces monsters in America?" The original statement becomes rhetorical, and I used French in particular here as it was the French who gave America its Statue of Liberty. There are five images in all, representing five continents. In Africa, it is an image of an old white man, rather than an African, asleep at the desk. In Asia, the figure is a black man. In the most basic terms I am suggesting that irrational aggression, born out of a form of Enlightenment rational reasoning, toward a race that you do not understand produces a sleep of "reason" out of which comes monsters—and the term *monsters* could be substituted here with any amount of atrocity. Your enlightened intentions, in sum, do not necessarily produce enlightened results.

AD: When this work was first shown in 2008 in New York, it was under the collective title *Prospero's Monsters*—what is the reference to Caliban, the figure in the play that you just mentioned?

YS: There were no images in that show depicting Caliban, or Prospero for that matter, but I felt it was a good title to frame the exhibition with because in a broader context I am talking about the relationship between the other and the master. I was attracted to the play because in it Caliban refuses to be civilized; he fights back and is not as passive as is often portrayed. He not only fights back but refuses to learn Prospero's language and the codifications that go with it. When he does learn the language he learns only the swear words, which is very irreverent of him. And that, I thought, was a form of empowerment.

AD: In that show you also had a series of figures more closely associated with the Enlightenment, including Adam Smith, often seen as the father of modern economics, and the eighteenth-century physicist and philosopher Jean le Rond

d'Alembert. In each case, these figures, of which there are five in all (see pp. 120–25), have been given disabilities—why was this?

YS: I'm doing two things there; one is an autobiographical device. I have my own physical disability but also the Enlightenment scientists and philosophers had their own human frailties, too; however, it is the human, the sense of frailty that is too irrational and disorganized, that is often factored out of discussions about reason and rationalism. Because it is unpredictable, disability does not lie well with the essence of Enlightenment certainty—bearing in mind the overarching empiricism associated with the time. In giving Adam Smith and Jean le Rond d'Alembert disabilities, alongside the figures of Antoine Lavoisier, Gabrielle Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, and Immanuel Kant, I wanted to use it as a device for showing how these figures, who were partly responsible for defining otherness in the context of the Enlightenment, could also be "othered" in the context of disability.

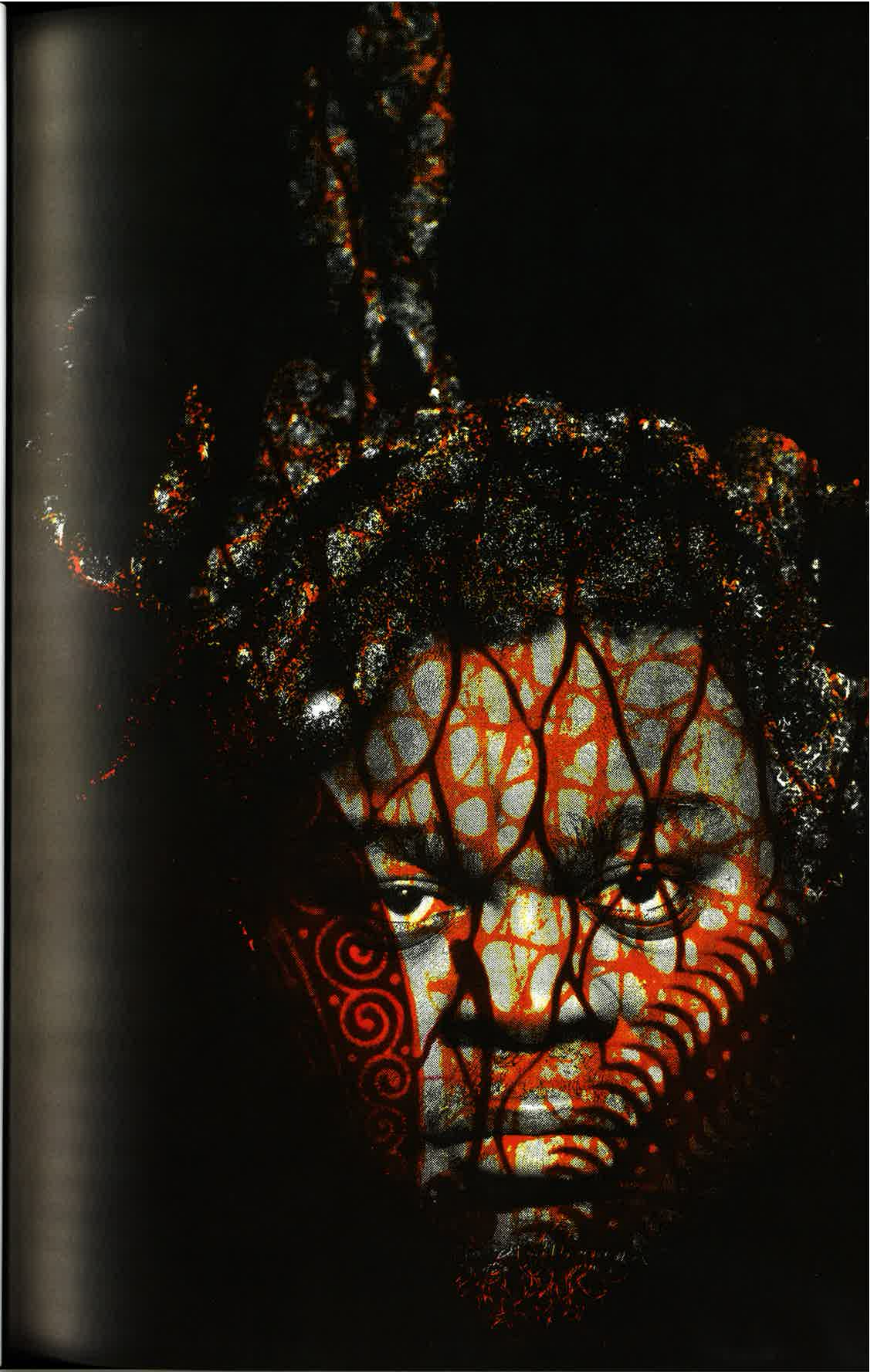
AD: It seems that these works question the empiricist underpinnings of the Enlightenment period and invert its processes of thinking about otherness and how we look at other cultures.

YS: That is very much part of what I am doing there.

AD: Finally, can I ask you what you are working on presently?

YS: At present I am rereading Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), which interests me on a number of levels. I am particularly interested in the question of Gulliver's empathy with the different cultures he encounters. He sees that they are different and they see that he is different, and they are trying to learn from his culture and he is trying to learn from their culture. He rarely seems to come down in favor of one group over the other before he has had a chance to listen to both sides of the story. I am at a relatively preliminary stage in my thinking about this and rereading a book I first read as a child, but it holds a number of points of interest for me at this moment in time—and will no doubt provoke some thoughts on my behalf. Gulliver's voyages also see him becoming involved in internal power struggles in the lands he visits, but he himself is also, at various stages, both powerful and powerless depending on the context. Which brings us back to the question of power and its contexts and how we assume and in some cases are beholden to power itself.

Anthony Downey is director of the Master's Program in Contemporary Art at Sotheby's Institute of Art, London. He is editor of *Ibraaz* (www.ibraaz.org), a research forum for visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East, and sits on the editorial board of *Third Text*. This conversation was conducted in 2008 in advance of the touring retrospective *Yinka Shonibare MBE*.



Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Self-Portrait (after Warhol) 2* (detail), 2013. Unique screen print, digital print, hand-painted linen; 134.5 x 134 cm. Collection of John and Amy Phelan