

YINKA SHONIBARE

THE ESSENTIAL

INAUTHENTICITY OF REALITY



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I have to admit that, although the first time I came across Yinka Shonibare's work I appreciated its retrospective reference to modern abstraction via its use of decorative "African cloth" patterns, I saw no critical potential in the work other than the union of two discourses which are normally associated, respectively, with superior and inferior (or 'high' and 'popular') cultural practices. However, as I now recognize, the piece *Double Dutch* (1994) — an installation of about 50 panels of "African cloth" painted by the artist with thick, shiny expressionist brushstrokes — is in fact the basis of a much wider cultural critique about the fiction of identity, which exposes the dividing line between identity-as-essence and identity-as-process. If Shonibare's suggestion was indeed intentional — that Western Modernism was an example of how non-Western cultures became catalysts for the creation of alternative attitudes and forms— then it struck me as even more relevant when I saw *How Does a*

Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You (1995) which, ironically, was included in an exhibition of African textiles organized by the Barbican Center in London as part of the Africa '95 festival. This piece consists of three Victorian-style suits, complete with period details such as intricate tails, sewn together by the artist using off-cuts of this so-called African cloth. Again, this piece implied two different styles and two contrasting meanings and, once more, it seemed to lend itself to the temptation of being interpreted as a commentary about the West's dependence on its colonies for its own sense of identity. This suggestion clearly raises questions about influences and authenticity, as well as relations and appropriation, since it was not only the West which was transformed by amalgamations and cultural combinations. Such ideas and themes culminated in *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlor* (1996). In this piece, Shonibare recreated a typical parlor of the Victorian Age, where absolutely



Yinka Shonibare. *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour*, 1996-97. Reproduction furniture, fire screen, carpet, props. African fabric.
Overall size varies according to installation.

everything, including the wallpaper, curtains, carpet, chimney-guard and furniture covers, was designed by the artist using the "African cloth" patterns. As in *How Does a Girl.....*, the symbiosis seemed complete: the cloth's printed designs did not threaten to dissolve the Victorian fantasy, and neither did the ostentatious Victorian *mise-*

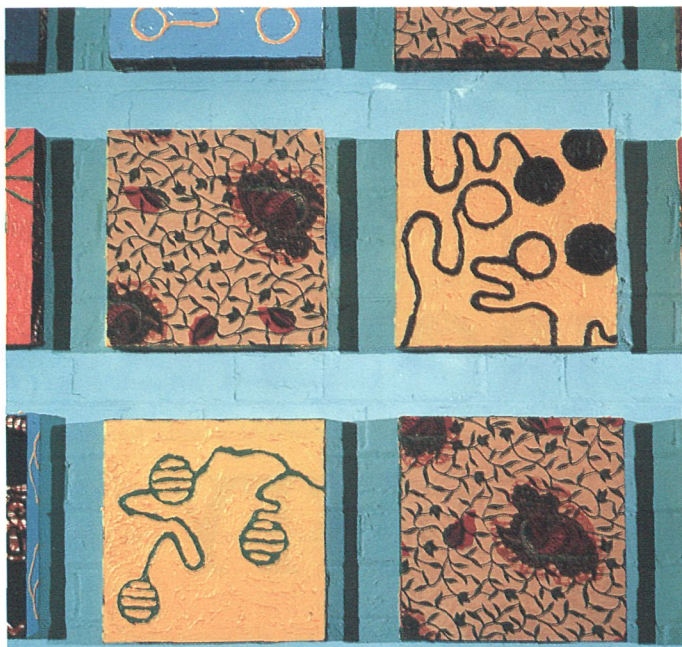
en-scene conspire to transform the "African patterns" into mere accessories of its own decadence. However, this hybrid is not merely the result of a simple union between two cultural codes, wherein each remains intact. Nor is it a product of adaptation or assimilation, which would have confirmed the structures and identities of the



Yinka Shonibare. *Double Dutch*. 1994. Emulsion, acrylic on textiles.
50 panels. 32 x 22 x 4.5 cm each panel. Overall size varies according to installation.

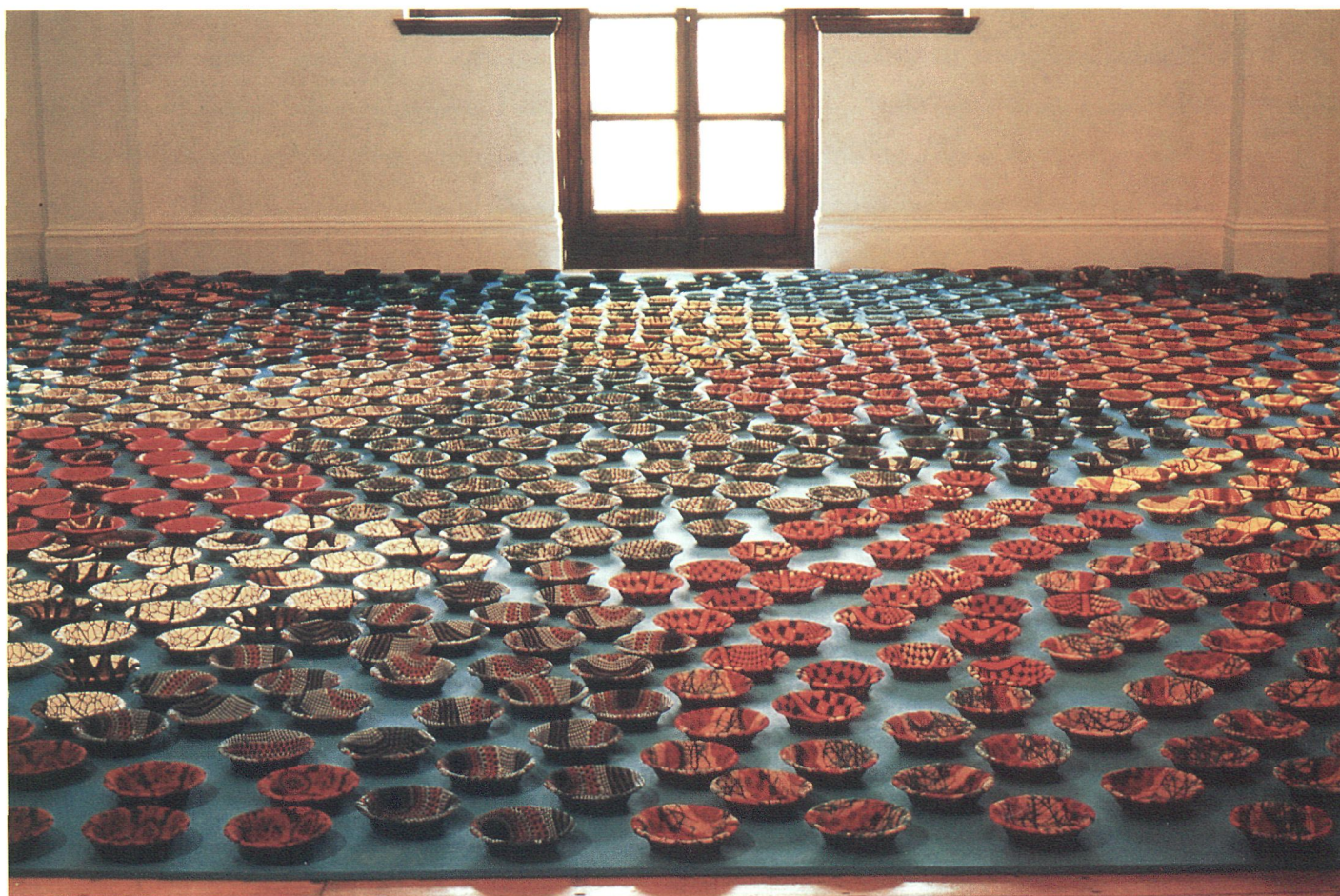
original forms. This hybrid, then, is not a mixture of opposites which do not interrupt the supposed purity or authenticity of the other. Like all cultures, British culture is a continual process of interaction in which many of its components are reorganized, exchanged, inserted and grafted so as to influence, revitalize, coexist or interfere with different cultures. On the other hand, as Yinka Shonibare confirms, "batik, which is what "African" cloth is commonly called, originates in Indonesia and is

produced industrially in Holland and Manchester for exportation to Africa, where it is made into traditional costumes. The adoption of this kind of cloth, particularly in West African countries, has favored the development of local industries which also manufacture cloth". In this piece, and in its urban inscription, Shonibare not only questions the presence of a previous order, but also turns cultural authority upside down. Nonetheless, culture, history, language and traditions are rarely destroyed;



Yinka Shonibare. *Plaything*. 1996-97. Emulsion, acrylic on textile.
30 panels, 30 x 30 cm each panel.
Overall size varies according to installation.

instead they are gradually taken apart and questioned, revised, rewritten and redirected. As Gayatri Spivak has pointed out: "In post-colonialism, every metropolitan definition has been cast aside. The general trend of the post-colonial era is the rewriting and redirecting of history". In such a way that identity is formed in movement, on the go, in the gaps between the displacement of all the 'histories' of which it is formed: "at the unstable point where subjectivity's 'unspeakable' histories meet the narratives of history, of culture" (Stuart Hall). And, as Shonibare's work illustrates, identity is a process: not of becoming something within the supposed authenticity of cultural forms, but of constant movement, like the effect of what Olu Oguibe described as "the essential inauthenticity of reality".



Yinka Shonibare. *Sun, Sea and Sand*. 1995. Mixed media installation at BAC, London. Dimensions variable.