

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Karafin, Amy, "Yinka Shonibare, MBE 'Prospero's Monsters'," *Time Out New York*, May 8-14, 2008



Yinka Shonibare, MBE, "Prospero's Monsters"

Installation view



★★★★★

James Cohan Gallery, through May 17 (see Chelsea)

By now, Yinka Shonibare's work looks familiar: the headless mannequins with unnaturally orange skin and 18th-century European affectations; the froufrou clothing of that era, depicted in the loud colors of Real Dutch Wax—printed cotton popular in Africa today. Still, rather than getting old, his installations and photographs seem to be deepening, his scenes becoming more complex and more disturbing.

"Prospero's Monsters"—named after the pseudo-colonist character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—centers on the Enlightenment period, or more aptly, on its dark underbelly. In the center gallery, five mannequins depict intellectual leaders of the time working at desks in their stately ruffles. But Shonibare, who is himself partly paralyzed, has given them prosthetics like crutches or wooden arms—metaphors for how the progress they extolled was undermined by the economy that made it possible: the Atlantic slave trade, and the oppression of the lower class that would soon spark revolution.

If these works evoke imminent doom, the sculpture *La Méduse* actually depicts it: The wood-ship model with Dutch-fabric sails is a rendering of a French vessel lost on its way to Senegal in 1816, and made famous two years later by Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. Most on board died, but those who survived made it to the colony. The event calls to mind the story of Prospero, who was banished to sea, only to find himself on an island whose inhabitants he placed under his spell. Shonibare's work is becoming subtler, more prescient, and even more eloquent in communicating the dark sorcery of oppression. —Amy Karafin

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