

APT APPROPRIATION: CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ARTISTS' UTILIZATION OF
CANONICAL WESTERN ART

By

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To my cheerleaders

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A number of important contemporary African artists have utilized the Western canon of art history as a central theme in their work. These artists have borrowed a great deal of imagery from recognizable Western works, appropriating elements to serve their own critical purposes. Some re-fashion essential parts, others parody canonical works; some create simulacra, others combine elements to create montage, while still others borrow recognizable styles while infusing works with contemporary resonances. My exploration of contemporary African artists who utilize elements of the Western canon seeks to document and discern the diverse motivations for cultural exchanges between the West and Africa via the visual arts.

I will analyze a selection of works by Nigerian/British artist Yinka Shonibare, MBE, who transforms familiar eighteenth-century French works of art into life-size sculptural installations re-dressed in "African" wax-print fabrics. I will also address South African artist Wim Botha's re-fashioning of a well-known Renaissance religious sculpture. I will consider works by Sudanese artist Hassan Musa, who incorporates recognizable elements from many Western works into his paintings on textiles. South African design team Strangelove's re-creation of a particularly widespread image of a well-known Western work challenges viewers to rethink the original work in light of this contemporary re-imagining. South African artist Johannes

Phokela's use of a Rubens-influenced Baroque style of painting combined with contemporary allusions will also be interrogated.

These artists harness the familiarity and visual power of the Western images, while altering the images to serve their own means. By changing certain aspects of the original works, the re-imagined works' diverse meanings become clear. Through close analysis, I will show how this selection of contemporary African artists' works critique contemporary and historical understandings of global relations, the art world, and particular histories that still reverberate today.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

A number of important contemporary African artists have utilized the Western canon of art history as a central theme in their work. Each artist has borrowed imagery from recognizable Western works that are frequently exhibited and have been the subject of much critical analysis. These artists have re-imagined familiar works according to their own aims. Looking at contemporary African artists who utilize elements of the Western canon reveals important manifestations of conceptual and cultural exchange that takes place between the West and Africa via visual arts. Contemporary African artists often find themselves with a foot in both African and Western cultures, and this globalized aspect of their lived experiences allows them a notable multi-cultural perspective, which often informs and shapes their work.

Many of these artists' ideas manifest in playful and biting political and cultural criticisms. These critiques make these works powerful commentaries on global interactions. Contemporary African artists employ varied means to make use of recognizable Western visual art. Their borrowings present viewers with the opportunity to reconsider, question, and revisit both the original works and their re-creations. These artists harness the Western images' familiarity and visual power, while altering the images to serve their own means. Some re-motivate these images to refute Eurocentric fictions, while others complicate conventional notions and ideologies. Generally, these artists borrow imagery to undermine or complicate historical and/or contemporary understandings, both of Africa and the West.

This analysis opens with a selection of works by renowned Nigerian/British artist Yinka Shonibare, MBE, who transforms familiar eighteenth-century French works of art into life-size sculptural installations re-dressed in "African" wax-print fabrics. South African artist Wim Botha's refashioning of a well-known Renaissance religious sculpture will also be addressed.

Works by Sudanese artist Hassan Musa, who incorporates recognizable elements from many Western works into his paintings on textiles will also be considered. South African design team Strangelove's re-creation of a particularly widespread image of a well-known Western work challenges viewers to rethink the original work in light of this contemporary re-imagining. South African artist Johannes Phokela's use of a Rubenesque Baroque style of painting combined with contemporary allusions will also be interrogated. All of these works by this selection of contemporary African artists make their initial visual impact because of their familiarity. Viewers can recognize familiar aspects at first glance. Their diverse meanings, which depart from the recognizable façades, become clear after specific aspects of the re-imagined works are realized. After an initial familiarity is established, viewers may feel courted by Shonibare or duped by Botha, and perhaps pressed into seeing the deeper criticisms each work has to offer.

Contemporary African artists who utilize recognizable Western imagery in their works of art do not do so lightly. Each artist capitalizes on the familiarity of the original image to attract the viewer's attention. The artists appropriate elements in their own ways to serve their own critical purposes. Through their appropriation, some re-fashion essential parts, others parody canonical works; some create simulacra, others combine elements to create montage, while still others borrow recognizable styles while infusing works with contemporary resonances. Each artist uses slightly different means of appropriation, and the artists' motivations for using references to canonical Western works will be interrogated. By using familiar images, artists may intend to prompt viewers to reconsider original works. These images may be employed as a metaphor for the West, for use in postcolonial critiques. Artists may actively engage with the works parodied, or they may utilize them simply for their familiarity. Close analysis will reveal how this selection of contemporary African artists' works that utilize elements of canonical

Western works of art critique contemporary and historical understandings of global relations, the art world, and particular histories that still reverberate today.

The Challenges of Working with Lesser-Known Artists

All of the artists included here use similar methods to achieve different ends. However, a few representative superstars continue to be the only recognized “non-Western” artists visible in the Western art establishment. Therefore, I try to bring lesser-known artists to the fore by anchoring them to one of these “darlings” of contemporary African art—Yinka Shonibare, MBE. The artists I have selected all use appropriated canonical Western imagery, much like Shonibare. However, the challenges of writing on lesser-known artists must be acknowledged. Little critical writing is accessible or available, so to aid my own reading of the works in question, I have, where possible, communicated directly with the artists themselves.¹ I have also scoured what little critical writing is available, including exhibition essays, reviews, interviews, and other related texts.

Predominance of South African Artists

The predominance of South African artists both in the contemporary art gallery and museum world broadly and in the group of artists under consideration here must be considered. Of the six artists I have selected, four are from South Africa—Wim Botha, Strangelove (a team of two artists) and Johannes Phokela. Each of these artists considers the role of South Africa’s turbulent history in different ways, some implicitly, some explicitly. The prominence of South African artists reflects the strength of the professional art scene in South Africa, which is much more developed than most other African countries. Johannesburg and Cape Town boast thriving

¹ Wim Botha and Carlo Gibson and Ziemek Pater of Strangelove graciously communicated with me via email, and Yinka Shonibare, MBE, answered my questions on the occasion of his January 2008 exhibition opening, *Odile and Odette*.

gallery scenes, and the Johannesburg biennials of 1995 and 1997 announced South Africa's return to the international art scene, though this particular biennial has ceased in recent years. Partly due to South Africa's singular history and partly due to its active art scene, several exhibitions have focused exclusively on South African artists and the legacy of apartheid in the last decade or so.² It is difficult to balance representation of contemporary African artists in these circumstances. Access to information on these emerging or lesser-known artists is limited. Though this situation is slowly beginning to change, it still plays a major role in writing about artists living and practicing today.

Contemporary African artists sometimes appropriate canonical Western imagery for use in their work. Whether to comment on postcolonialism, the legacy of the Western art historical canon, or contemporary and historical understandings, this method of critique can be enacted in many different ways. By combining broad or specific references to Africa and the West, each artist imbues appropriated images with new meaning. The ensuing works of art reveal a great deal about conceptual and cross-cultural exchanges between Africa and the West.

² See for example *Liberated Voices: Contemporary Art from South Africa*, ed. Frank Herreman (New York: Museum for African Art, 1999) and *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, 2 vols. (New York: Museum for African Art, 2004).

CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The contemporary works of art that I will examine all share a number of features. The artists borrow elements, styles, narratives, or images from canonical works of Western art. This “borrowing” can be understood in terms of pastiche. To pastiche is “to copy or imitate”;¹ it is “a literary, artistic, musical, or architectural work that imitates the style of a previous work.”² The Grove Dictionary of Art defines “pastiche” as an “image that self consciously borrows its style, technique or motifs from other works of art yet is not a direct copy. The result can be somewhat incoherent and at times is deliberately exaggerated and satirical, as in a caricature. The term is generally applied in a derogatory sense, implying that the artist was unoriginal.”³

The function and understanding of pastiche in the postmodern sense varies from these more general (and often negative) definitions. Although I use the term “appropriation” to refer to this borrowing, the broader notion of “pastiche” provides a useful foundation to begin examining these artists’ conceptual techniques. In her history of *pasticcio* and pastiche, Ingeborg Hoesterey illustrates “the quasi-anonymous definition of pastiche as ‘neither original nor copy’ ... established the genre of pastiche as we now know it.”⁴ Hoesterey also notes that, “art history of this [20th] century has used the notion of pastiche predominantly to mark the Other of high art. Despite its lowly status, the genre of pastiche functions as a fixed convention in the language of

¹ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, in Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2001), ix.

² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, 4 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pastiche>>.

³ “Pastiche,” *Grove Art Online*, Oxford University Press, 4 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.groveart.com.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/>>.

⁴ Ingeborg Hoesterey, *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 2001), 5-6.

art history, which may account for the absence of critical inquiry on the subject.”⁵ Hoesterey is only able to track the word “pastiche” and its Italian predecessor “pasticcio” to the sixteenth century. However, the original practice of pastiche, or combining disparate stylistic features in a work of art, dates back at least to Classical antiquity, when Roman artists emulated the style of the Greeks.⁶ Indeed, for much of pastiche’s history, it has been looked down upon as a deceptive artistic practice. In spite of this, the advent of postmodernism and critical theory in the visual arts has elevated the genre from its lowly beginnings.⁷

Pastiche has recently been defined as “art that imitates other art in such a way that the fact of imitation is evident.”⁸ As an artistic genre, it encompasses a variety of meanings and manifestations as well as a host of related terms. Hoesterey attempts to distinguish between the varied forms of pastiche, stating that, “The slippery quality associated with the pastiche genre is in part due to the dual structural profile that was there from the outset: imitation of a masterwork and the ‘pâté’ of components.”⁹ What Hoesterey means here is that pastiche is twofold, and thus difficult to pinpoint absolutely. Pastiche can refer to works of art that imitate the style of other specific works or artists’ styles. The term can also describe those works that mix together recognizable components not originally found in concert, whether they are disparate iconographic elements or a blending of styles from different artistic movements. In much

⁵ Hoesterey, 1.

⁶ Hoesterey, 2.

⁷ Hoesterey, 21.

⁸ Richard Dyer, “The Notion of Pastiche,” *The Aesthetics of Popular Art*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (Bergen: Høyskoleforlaget AS, 2001), 77.

⁹ Hoesterey, 9. Hoesterey references the Italian heritage of pastiche, *pasticcio*, which derived from the early modern Italian word, *pasta*. This *pasta* is a variant of today’s pâté, meaning the hodgepodge of meat, vegetables, eggs, and a variety of other possible additions (Hoesterey, 1).

contemporary art, but specifically those works that can be described as pastiche, “The viewer of visual arts is made into a reader; unless one can decipher the intertexts, many postmodern works will offer only a banal aesthetic experience... The visual art object moves into the arena of multiple layers of interpretation typical of the reception of a work of literature.”¹⁰ In order to fully appreciate the work of a pasticheur, the viewer must recognize and comprehend the intertextuality of visual references. For pastiche to function as a concept for cultural inquiry, “...one has to ‘get’ the fact that the something going on is pastiche and to get what is being pastiched.... Not getting the fact of pastiche or what is being pastiched may not spoil the basic understanding or pleasure of a work, but it may involve missing out on a dimension.”¹¹

Each of the works discussed below relies on the viewer’s visual recognition of the canonical works to which they make reference. To be successful, “pastiche must logically reference something that precedes it”; the contemporary works of art discussed in this paper reference historical works of art.¹² Pastiche can reference other works in many ways; it can imitate widespread characteristics of the artistic period or imitate a precise reproduction of an autonomous work.¹³ A pastiche can be very similar to that which it pastiches, but pastiche may also be achieved by discrepancy, by something that is inappropriate or incongruous to the original.¹⁴ Beyond an initial recognition, the viewer is “...challenged to detect and decipher the intertextual fabric of a work. Pastiche, based on the principle of cumulation, have always

¹⁰ Hoesterey, 27.

¹¹ Dyer, “The Notion of Pastiche,” 84.

¹² Dyer, “The Notion of Pastiche,” 85.

¹³ Dyer, “The Notion of Pastiche,” 85.

¹⁴ Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2007), 54-62.

abounded in ambiguity and indeterminacy.”¹⁵ The works that will be analyzed assume an intellectual interrogation of the viewer. “Today’s intellectual pastiches are about culture as a process of meaning constitution; they critically reflect upon the historicity of aesthetic judgment and taste.”¹⁶ These works turn on certain cultural signifiers: by using well known works re-created in specific ways, these artists challenge conventional understandings. This selection of work also aims to critique stereotypical understandings and delves deeper into the intertwined histories and shared contemporary moments of Africa and the West.

Pastiche is a genre that transcends the visual arts. It can be found in literature, film, and popular culture.¹⁷ However, a clear line should be drawn between the ways in which artists utilize the genre of pastiche to expand and challenge the understanding of viewers, compared to the commercialized reincarnations made for product sales. The appropriation of recognizable images or elements for use in commercialized items by no means should resonate with the more lofty goals of postmodern pastiche. The “signifying potential” of pastiche, here, is undermined in favor of turning a profit.¹⁸ As one of the works I will discuss makes clear, tourist mementos such as three-inch plastic *Davids* from Florence hardly expand critical understandings of the monumental Renaissance sculpture.

¹⁵ Hoesterey, 31.

¹⁶ Hoesterey, 31.

¹⁷ Indeed, as Hoesterey notes, “Pastiche structuration in the arts both high and low is a ubiquitous presence.” (Hoesterey, 118).

¹⁸ Hoesterey, 41. “The artistically ambitious, new type of pastiche has little or nothing in common with the vast number of copies after originals, fraudulent ‘rip-offs,’ and lowly imitations that continue to be produced in the most diverse contexts.” (Hoesterey, 31).

Semantic Interrogation

Before delving into individual works, it is instructive to better define some of the terms that relate to the genre of “pastiche.” I will outline the key terms here that will resurface in discussions of individual works of art, and clarify how they use pastiche. “Adaptation” in general refers to the transposition and modification of creative material from one genre to another.¹⁹ A familiar example is the creative transposition of a novel into a film. However, in the visual arts, adaptation can refer to a transposition from one medium to another. “Appropriation” in the visual arts emphasizes the intentional borrowing of a historical style or related elements; it is a sort of visual citation.²⁰ The artist consciously borrows and utilizes recognizable elements, while making full use of their specific implications. The use of certain elements through appropriation is deliberate, where the artist intends viewers both to recognize and critically understand appropriated elements for their signifying content.

“Refiguration” takes the formal elements of past styles and recasts them in a contemporary moment. Often this results in a “disquieting synthesis of past form and present context.”²¹ Refiguration is different from appropriation in that the combination of a historical style and present context collide in the work. Original historical meaning is refigured or converted into a sign of the present, often with unsettling effects. “Simulacrum” reaches beyond a borrowing or imitation of elements; instead, simulacrum substitutes “the sign of the real for the real itself.”²² Simulacrum is as close to a perfect copy as possible; a second version, though different, possesses the signifying qualities of the original. “Montage” is a specific type of pastiche that

¹⁹ Hoesterey, 10.

²⁰ Hoesterey, 10.

²¹ Hoesterey, 14-15.

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext (e), 1983): 4, as cited in Hoesterey, 15.

joins together various images in a “seamless manner,” producing a new entity. “Collage,” on the other hand, combines disparate images to form a new entity; however, the original images retain their own identity.²³

“Parody” goes beyond simple imitation in that its intention is ultimately satirical or critical. In pastiche, the original intention of the borrowed style or iconographic elements is maintained. Parody has contrasting intentions, and often serves to ridicule or satirically comment upon the original borrowed style.²⁴ In fact, pastiche is sometimes defined as “blank parody.”²⁵ “Imitation,” by contrast, can be as considerable as the production of a copy, or as minimal as a mere resemblance. However, the word for word, image for image, or brushstroke for brushstroke imitation with the intent to deceive characterizes literary plagiarism and the visual art “fake.” This goes beyond the innocent imitation. As Hoesterey puts it, “The basic structure of pastiche is a degree of imitation. What happens beyond this determines the artistic success of both the traditional and the postmodern pastiche.”²⁶ All of the works that will be discussed in the following pages use elements of imitation; however, the specific ways in which these works surpass simple imitation is the subject of this inquiry. My aim is to identify and analyze the specific types of appropriation employed in the production of each work.

Other terms I will take up and utilize in my discussions include “re-fashion,” “re-dress,” and “re-create.” I intend these words to be read in two ways, both with and without their hyphens. For example, “refashion” simply refers to the action, to remake or alter, and “re-

²³ Hoesterey, 11-13.

²⁴ Hoesterey, 13-14.

²⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-92, as cited in Richard Dyer, “The Notion of Pastiche,” *The Aesthetics of Popular Art*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (Bergen: Høyskoleforlaget AS, 2001), 78.

²⁶ Hoesterey, 12.

fashion” describes the dressing again in fashions that have been revamped, changed, or altered in some way, where the clothing literally takes center stage. I mean the viewer to understand both meanings simultaneously: “re-fashion” then becomes the remaking of fashions, quite literally. “Re-dress” functions in a similar way. I use “redress” to refer to its common definition, to make up for or set right, and I use the hyphenated version to refer to literally “dressing again.” This “re-dress” refers to clothing, dress, and fashion, which play important roles in many of the works that will be discussed. Because all of the contemporary works of art that I will discuss utilize references to canonical works of art, I often refer to the contemporary works that have “re-created” familiar works. Again, I use this term in both its hyphenated form, which means “to form anew in the imagination,” and by extension refers to creating a new and unique work of art. I also utilize “recreated” in its un-hyphenated form, which means “to give new life or freshness to,” here referring back to the original work of art that inspired the contemporary work in question.²⁷ Note also that I use the words “recognizable” and “familiar” to refer to different levels of recognition. If something is “recognizable,” I assume viewers can specifically place the visual reference. If something is merely “familiar,” I assume that viewers have come into contact with the image, though may not be able to immediately conjure its history or importance. The variety of terms discussed here will reflect the range of approaches the artists have utilized in their works of appropriated canonical Western art.

The Canon

Whether the term is applied to art history, literature, film, or religion, a canon refers to the “accepted” or “official” version, often made up of a corpus of works that fit a particular criteria, admitting them to an “official” status. I believe that it is necessary to clarify how I am utilizing

²⁷ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, 26 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>>.

the canon of Western art history since I invoke it throughout this paper. The notion of this canon, no matter how problematic, is useful in that it provides a selection of works of art that are familiar. It also represents the power that official art history continues to exert. I am not interested here in breaking down or interrogating the notion, definition, limits or bounds of the canon. Instead, I am exploring how contemporary African artists respond to or incorporate canonical works of Western art in their own work.

It is important to recognize that the idea of a canon still merits a place in the study of art history, and that a selection of images are readily recognizable to a large number of viewers. The artists who make use of canonical works of art do so in part because of these images' familiarity. They capitalize on this familiarity to capture the attention of viewers. All of the artists have changed or altered some aspect of the original works. These differences are the most important, as they make critical comment on the contemporary moment. By utilizing canonical works of art, these artists often engage with supposed historical truths and difficult contemporary understandings inherent to their nuanced critiques.

The Problematics of Classifying Artists

I have selected a number of contemporary African artists who utilize elements of the Western canon of art history in their works of art. The artists included are African: they were born on the continent or their families are from Africa. Sometimes, though, the designation of "African artist" is used to connote a certain preoccupation or dominant theme surrounding the continent in their work. The label can denote artists with a range of ties to the continent: some artists were born, live, and work in Africa, such as South African artists Wim Botha and the team of two artists that comprise Strangelove. Others were born in Africa, but subsequently moved to the West where they currently live and work, such as South African artist Johannes Phokela and Sudanese artist Hassan Musa. Still others have more complicated histories: Yinka Shonibare,

MBE, was born in London, raised in Lagos, Nigeria, and returned to the UK for art school and has remained there ever since.

To a certain extent, any efforts to classify artists are problematic, but they can sometimes provide a necessary referent. To be classified as “African” can open doors to the many exhibitions that are loosely based on these geographic ties. Indeed, numerous exhibitions have been mounted with this geographic location as theme in mind: for example, *Africa Remix*, *Authentic/Ex-Centric*, and *Looking Both Ways*. However, the classification can limit the ways in which artists’ works are perceived and understood. Hassan Musa states, “Personally as an artist born in Africa, but with no urge to bear the burden of the African artist, I know that the only opportunities open to me to present my work in public outside Africa are of the ‘ethnic’ type, where people assign to me the role of ‘the other African’ in places designed for the kind of seasonal ritual where a certain kind of Africa is ‘in favour.’”²⁸ Here, Musa’s reference to a “seasonal ritual” may be a direct reference to this sort of exhibition. In a critique of *Africa Remix*, art historian Sylvester Ogbechie interrogates the implications of generating exhibitions around this tenuous label, “African art history operates in a field where most of its scholarship occurs on the pages of exhibition catalogs. What kinds of knowledge do curators create about Africa?”²⁹

Interestingly, other artists that are surely “African” have managed to transcend the sometimes-confining label. The South African artist William Kentridge, who has enjoyed considerable success in the international art scene, is generally not presented as an African artist.

²⁸ David Elliott, “Africa, Exhibitions and Fears of the Dark,” in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, ed. Simon Njami (Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005), 27.

²⁹ Sylvester Ogbechie, “POV: Contemporary African Art: REPLY,” 21 March 2005, H-AfrArts Posting, 16 Feb. 2008 <<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-afrarts&month=0503&week=c&msg=FRz7dw/hX22mabfycu0pxQ&user=&pw=>>.

Others are able to embody a series of different labels, depending on the situation and the necessity of each. Shonibare, for example, is often included in continent-focused exhibitions as an “African” artist. However, it was his “Britishness” that enabled him to be considered for Britain’s annual Turner Prize, for the Turner Prize is an award for British artists, and also artists working in Britain.³⁰

In truth, labels should not matter. They are a shorthand way of referencing a decidedly more complex and nuanced idea: in this case, the idea of identity. Johannes Phokela is one artist who has spoken to this sort of classification: “All artists, regardless of colour, regard themselves as people who are making art. And that’s prior to any form of identity. It always comes across as a puzzle to me when notions of colour, race, gender, come into it, because I think they have nothing to do with the work. Once you have the work it doesn’t really matter who produced it. What counts is the quality. But unfortunately, the contemporary international art scene has this tendency to dwell on the background of the artist.”³¹ Particularly problematic is when this preoccupation implies that African artists are only self-taught, or non-educated.³²

Anthropologist Allen F. Roberts comments directly upon Phokela’s and Shonibare’s precarious positions: “A well-known conundrum marks the two men’s work, for each wishes to transcend the ghettoizing implicit in the phrase ‘African artist,’ while both engage the politics of being just that, especially as they live as persons of African descent in Europe.”³³ Indeed, in her examination of Shonibare’s work, Nancy Hynes asks, “What is African? What is European?”

³⁰ Claire Bishop, “Preface,” in Virginia Button, *The Turner Prize* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 10.

³¹ “Johannes Phokela,” interviewed by Tracy Murinik, in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, 2 vols. (New York: Museum for African Art, 2004), vol. 1, 117.

³² See “Two Conversations: Jean Pigozzi & Andre Megnin,” in *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection* (London: Merrell, 2005), 11.

³³ Allen F. Roberts, “Le Musée Cannibale,” *African Arts* 36:4 (2003): 11.

Who creates and consumes these identities?”³⁴ Many artists resist the implications of any stereotypical understanding of this classification. As curator Bruce Haines notes, “Phokela in many ways follows a lineage of black artists who have refused to be deterred and influenced by the reversed stereotyping of black culture in Europe, which Rasheed Araeen calls ‘positive stereotyping’ or benevolence...Phokela continually conveys a sense of resistance to the coffee table compendiums of African art. His complex historical reinterpretations do not lend themselves to easy categorization.”³⁵ Musa, too, resists the often limiting connotations accompanying these labels: “African art is an enormous ethical misunderstanding, which I try to take advantage of without aggravating it; but this leaves me with only a narrow margin for maneuver...It is a situation which is not lacking in ambivalence, and which gives me the impression of being a hostage to this strange machine which integrates African-born artists into the world of art, while at the same time shunting them off into a category apart.”³⁶ These artists use their conceptually rich work to complicate easy understandings of “Europe” or “Africa.” The works that I will examine appropriate and re-motivate certain images originating in the Western canon of art history to make comment on particular histories that still reverberate today.

³⁴ Nancy Hynes, “Yinka Shonibare: Addressing the Wandering Mind,” *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*, eds. Salah Hassan and Iftikhar Dadi (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001), 396.

³⁵ Bruce Haines, “Changing The Title,” in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001), 382.

³⁶ Elliott, 27.

CHAPTER 3 YINKA SHONIBARE, MBE

In 2001, Jean-Honoré Fragonard's famous eighteenth-century French painting, *The Swing* (1767) was re-imagined by Nigerian/British artist Yinka Shonibare, MBE (Figures 1 and 2). The original painting depicts a seemingly carefree aristocratic woman at the height of her swing. Her red cushioned swing is suspended by rope to a gnarled but flora-covered branch of an old tree set in a flourishing Rococo garden. She is pushed by her much older cleric husband but gazes down demurely at her young lover, hidden in the bushes in the left foreground. The woman kicks her delicate high-heeled shoe off at her lover, who gets a peek up the many layers of her sumptuous pink silk gown, trimmed with lace. The statues that decorate the garden underscore the taboo yet tantalizing nature of this scene. The cupid seen in profile on the far left puts his index finger to his lips, in a gesture of quieting any unwanted interruptions. Two putti embrace in the center background and peer at this love triangle. Often cited as emblematic of the frivolity, eroticism, and decadence of the Rococo, Fragonard's *The Swing* centers on this elicit act and illustrates a playful, sexually-charged scene.

Shonibare's adaptation transforms this oil painting into a three-dimensional installation, complete with a life-size mannequin, rope, fake foliage, and with the help of some fishing line, a high-heeled shoe suspended in mid-air. He refashions the female figure's luxurious frock, however, and tailors it out of "African" wax-print fabric. Shonibare's re-imagined leading lady appears without her lover, her husband, or her head, but dependent on installation, can now be viewed in the round. Some viewers readily recognize the scene being parodied, while others will note only the historical period implied by the lady's lavish dress. Both types of viewers, though, will note the incongruity of portraying this figure in such fabrics. In doing this, Shonibare

accomplishes several things; but first, the fabrics themselves beguile the eye and seduce the viewer, while his criticisms lie waiting, just below the surface.

Shonibare situates his works of art in the space between Africa and Europe, between the colonial past and postcolonial present. His contemporary art installations frequently utilize headless tan mannequins dressed in period costume, tailored in “African” wax-print fabric. Often his works parody recognizable scenes from canonical works in art history. Although Shonibare works in many media, including painting, sculpture, photography, and video, only his eighteenth-century French installation re-creations will be addressed here. In interviews, Shonibare has stressed the enormous economic disparities between the contemporary developing world and the wealthy developed West, as well as their historical connection through colonialism.¹ His works are often interpreted as an attempt to highlight the truth behind the immense wealth of Europeans, at the cost of the subjugated developing world, from the colonial period continuing through to today. Shonibare himself is particularly well-placed to comment on these issues, as he proclaims his own identity as “bi-cultural” and is concerned with the complicating of “pure” national identity.²

Shonibare was born in London in 1962 but spent the majority of his formative years in an upper-middle class home in Lagos, Nigeria. He returned to the UK for art school and has lived there since his late teen years. Now as an MBE, or Member of the British Empire, Shonibare takes this honor and official recognition as his platform; he has even added the suffix to his name officially.³ His works often obliquely refer to the relationship of British heritage to the wealth

¹ Yinka Shonibare, *MBE: Jardin d'Amour* (Paris: Musée du quai Branly, 2007), 12.

² “Give & Take Conversations,” *Art Journal* 61:2 (2002): 82.

³ Yinka Shonibare, *MBE: Jardin d'Amour*, 22.

garnered through trade, slavery, and colonialism. He also questions the notion of “European-ness” and authenticity. The histories of the developed and developing worlds are inextricably linked, and Shonibare’s work hinges on a somewhat unusual art material which underscores this connection: “African” wax-print fabric. These brightly colored, busily-patterned cloths have now become his trademark and can easily be recognized at a moment’s notice.

“African” Wax-Print Fabrics

Wax-print fabric often “looks African” to unsuspecting viewers. It is the manufactured printed fabric made popular in West Africa in the late nineteenth century as a cheap, imported alternative to locally woven cloths. Wax-print has since gained popularity throughout much of the continent and is also worn to proclaim black pride outside of the continent.⁴ Although these fabrics visually signify Africa, they are not indigenous to the continent.

Wax-print fabrics originated on the Indonesian island of Java around the sixteenth century.⁵ The term “batik” signifies both the process of dying textiles and the fabric itself. These fabrics are dyed with the wax-resist technique, in which hot liquid wax is applied to areas of the un-dyed fabric. When the layer of wax hardens on the surface of the cloth, the wax protects the fabric and effectively “resists” the colored dye when the fabric is submerged in a vat of dye. These wax-protected areas maintain the original color of the textile, leaving the desired contrasting design.⁶ Sometimes, the wax-resist cracks and allows the dye to penetrate the cloth in unwanted areas, creating “an irregular veining pattern.”⁷ The original Javanese batiks were

⁴ Nancy Hynes and John Picton, “Yinka Shonibare,” *African Arts* 34:3 (2001): 60.

⁵ Maria Wrońska-Friend, “Javanese Batik: The Art of Wax Design,” *Batik: 75 Selected Masterpieces* (Köln: Galeries Smend, 2006), 46.

⁶ Wrońska-Friend, 46.

⁷ Wrońska-Friend, 47.

created with arduous control by applying the wax-resist by hand, producing textiles that are each distinctive creations. The aim in Javanese batik is strong control in both drawing and design, and when this random veining effect occurs, it is generally treated as a technical mistake. However, this “mistake” has come to be known as a defining feature of the batik process in the West, and subsequently features in the manufactured “batik” fabrics. The industrialized process which mimics Javanese batik does not use the wax-print resist-dye technique at all. Instead, fabrics are mechanically printed by industrial rollers with patterns and designs inspired by the original batik process. The veining pattern is a popular feature in the European fabrics made for export to West Africa and features on all industrialized “wax-print” fabrics.

European-manufactured cloth intended for sale in Africa has a long history. According to art historian Christopher B. Steiner, “European textiles have been traded in West Africa since at least the fifteenth century.”⁸ In the seventeenth century, European manufacturers and Indian producers competed for market control in imported textiles. At this time, British linen manufacturers began accommodating African textile demands, responding both to local aesthetics and preferences. However, the wax-print fabrics in question were first brought to Europe by the Dutch in the late sixteenth century. The British began marketing these batiks to West Africans in the 1820s. In the 1880s, the Dutch started manufacturing their own wax-print cloth for export to their colonies. The manufactured textiles failed to sell in Indonesia, where craftsmanship and distinctive individual qualities were highly prized. Therefore, the main export destination became the African colonies. British manufacturers quickly responded to this competition by developing their own designs, dyes, techniques, and equipment to produce “an

⁸ Christopher B. Steiner, “Another Image of Africa: Toward and Ethnohistory of European Cloth Marketed in West Africa, 1873-1960,” *Ethnohistory* 32:2 (1985): 92.

industrialized version of Indonesian wax stamping to be sold in English-ruled West Africa.”⁹

These new mechanical printing techniques transformed the original hand-printed Indonesian wax-resist textiles into a mass-produced European commodity. Europeans have continued to export these textiles to West Africa through the present; however, an important shift in production occurred in the 1960s. Following independence movements, factories on the continent began producing manufactured textiles, borrowing techniques from Dutch and English manufacturers.¹⁰

These wax-print fabrics have been widely embraced by Africans on the continent as well as by others seeking a connection to Africa. In Shonibare’s explanation, “African fabric signifies African identity, rather like American jeans (Levi’s) are an indicator of trendy youth culture...In Brixton, African fabric is worn with pride amongst radical or cool youth. It manifests itself as a fashion accessory with black British women in the head wrap form, and it can also be found worn by Africans away from the home country. It becomes an aesthetic of defiance, an aesthetic of reassurance, a way of holding on to one’s identity in a culture presumed foreign or different. African fabric, exotica if you like, is a colonial construction. To the Western eye this excessive patterning (difference) carries with it codes of African nationalism; that has become its contemporary use, a kind of modern African exoticism.”¹¹ Writer and critic Kobena Mercer has remarked on the ultimately ambiguous use of this fabric, reminding viewers of its connotation on the continent: “...in Africa it has the allure of imported goods, in Europe it evokes exotica.”¹²

⁹ Leslie W. Rabine, *The Global Circulation of African Fashion* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 139.

¹⁰ Steiner, 92.

¹¹ Okwui Enwezor, “Tricking the Mind: The Work of Yinka Shonibare,” *Yinka Shonibare: Dressing Down* (Birmingham, UK: Ikon Gallery, 1999), 9.

¹² Kobena Mercer, “Art that is Ethnic in Inverted Commas: On Yinka Shonibare,” *Frieze* 25 (1995): 38-41.

Although this cloth may signify Africa outside of the continent, its roots are originally Javanese, and the cloth plays as much a part of British and Dutch colonial history as African. These fabrics are a product and a construction of the colonial encounter and continue to signify difference to Western viewers.

Reoccurring Motifs

Shonibare utilizes a number of reoccurring motifs throughout his works. One element that appears regularly in Shonibare's work is his use of wax-print fabric. He purchases the fabric for his installations at Brixton market in London, which adds another layer of complexity to this already hybrid "African" cloth.¹³ He also favors designs that include recognizable "Western" images, such as televisions, electric fans, spark plugs, automobiles, and even pirated designer labels.¹⁴ The incorporation of Western technologies and developments is sometimes jarring to Western viewers, who expect the fabrics to exist only in the "ethnographic present." The appearance of such images helps break down stereotypical notions of autonomous cultures and timeless, unchanging societies. In Shonibare's words, "The idea that there is some kind of dichotomy between Africa and Europe—between the 'exotic other' and the 'civilized European,' if you like—I think is completely simplistic. So I'm interested in exploring the mythology of these two so-called separate spheres, and in creating an overlap of complexities."¹⁵

¹³ Suzanne Landau, "Yinka Shonibare's Garden of Pleasure," *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dress* (Jerusalem, The Israel Museum, 2002), 9.

¹⁴ "Give & Take Conversations," 84. For example, a familiar Chanel label can be seen on heroine's dress in *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, spark plugs on the breeches of the male figure in *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads*, and electric fans adorn Shonibare's *Leisure Lady*, who is led by pug-nosed dogs.

¹⁵ "Yinka Shonibare: Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnavalesque and Power, a Conversation with Okwui Enwezor," *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, ed. Laurie Ann Farrell (New York: Museum for African Art, 2003), 163.

The artist's use of wax-print fabrics is undeniably the most salient feature of many of his works. Shonibare's re-dressing of eighteenth-century fashions in wax-print can seem quite out of place to Western eyes, as viewers are faced with fabrics that seem incongruous to the costumes they compose. This realization reveals the considerable implications of fabric, dress, and fashion. Though generally thought of as feminine and hence "lite" subject matter, dress can and has played significant roles in defining contemporary assertions, understandings, and criticisms.

In truth, dress and fashion are never simply innocent or devoid of implication. Every choice, every fabric, every style has connotations that reflect economics, political status, and personal identity. Dress is a major theme in Shonibare's work. His impeccably tailored period costumes re-made in wax-print fabrics are the main focus of his installations and are also a thread that links many of his works together. He capitalizes on the "otherness" of wax-print fabric and prompts viewers to question why this cloth looks so out of place tailored into period costume. The perceived absurdity draws viewers ever closer to the realization that perhaps the two worlds Shonibare collides in his installation are not so distant or distinct after all.

Shonibare's parody of eighteenth-century French Rococo painting is notable. From the mid-eighteenth century to the late-nineteenth century, the rise of the Western bourgeoisie was enabled largely by growing economic successes. These financial successes were garnered partly through investments in the slave trade, and partly through the exploitation of both the labor and resources of their own urban, industrialized poor and colonized peoples.¹⁶ The societies that Shonibare parodies benefited from this greatly expanding economy. For the first time, the bourgeoisie could obtain some of the status symbols of the aristocracy, such as clothing. Clothing historically has been a prime signifier of social status, and as Shonibare demonstrates,

¹⁶ Jean Fisher, "The Outsider Within: Shonibare's Dandy and the Parasitic Economy of Exchange," *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dress* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2002), 30.

clothing becomes his prime signifier in this web of inter-connectivity, reliance, and dependence, both historically and in our own contemporary moment. Shonibare makes conscious use of these fabrics with their complex history, hybrid nature, and contemporary significance in mind. He questions stereotypes and the concept (or construct) of an autonomous “African” or “European” authenticity through his collision of European period costume tailored from these fabrics.

Another prominent element of Shonibare’s works is his use of headless mannequins. The most convincing inspiration for Shonibare’s beheadings is the guillotine made famous through its liberal use during the French Revolution. Shonibare’s newest installation, commissioned by the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris for the summer 2007 exhibition, *Jardin d’Amour*, features three scenes from Fragonard’s *Progress of Love* series (Figures 3–5). Fragonard painted the series celebrating youthful courtship for Louis XV’s mistress, Madame du Barry, between 1770 and 1773. Madame du Barry herself lost her head to the guillotine, and this connection adds layers of significance to the work.¹⁷ Eighteenth-century French aristocrats paid the ultimate price for their luxury and frivolity, and by using headless mannequins, Shonibare makes a darkly “humoristic aperçu” to the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror.¹⁸ Some critics have understood this literal beheading as the metaphoric beheading of power.¹⁹ Though his works often seem to celebrate a life of leisure on the surface, the removal of the figures’ heads gives his re-imagined scenes a

¹⁷ See Joseph Baillio, “Un Portrait de Zamor, Page Bengalais de Madame Du Barry,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 140 (2002): 233–42. Interestingly, Madame du Barry’s own servant testified against her at the trial that sent her to the guillotine. The servant, Louis Benoist Zamor was a native of Bengal, but has been referred to as “negre” in literature throughout the past two centuries. Regardless of specific heritage, Zamor was decidedly considered “other” in eighteenth-century French discourse. This ironic twist adds yet another layer to Shonibare’s use of the headless mannequin in this series.

¹⁸ Jaap Guldemond and Gabriele Mackert, “To Entertain and Provoke: Western Influences in the Work of Yinka Shonibare,” *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dutch* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2004), 38.

¹⁹ “Yinka Shonibare: Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnavalesque and Power, a Conversation with Okwui Enwezor,” 166.

biting twist. In a sense, the beheading can be seen as an equalizing force. Speaking to this aspect of his works, Shonibare explains, "...the slight warning in my work is that you can have all this luxury, but you will have it at the expense of your head. There is a danger, you run a risk."²⁰

Shonibare simultaneously celebrates visual decadence and critiques these frivolous lifestyles as well as the monies that make such extravagance possible. The viewer, too, is implicated in this critique, taking pleasure from the visual splendor. Shonibare explains how his works function: "At first, I always bring people in. From the start when you enter you begin to enjoy yourself; it's very exciting, it's very bright and engaging and seducing, and then the provocation comes. Then you have to face it and deal with it."²¹ The light-hearted scenes and lavish costumes of bright wax-print fabrics are meant to enthrall the viewer visually, and the beheading, then, serves to point to the underlying critiques of historical and continued economic disparities between the developed West and the developing world.

And in beheading these characters from canonical works of Western art, these individuals are depersonalized.²² No longer individuals, the headless mannequins become signifiers of the decadent culture they represent. The skin color, too, helps to destabilize any one reading of Shonibare's mannequins. Most commercial mannequins are stark, white figures clad in the newest fashions adorning clothing store display windows. Shonibare has deliberately chosen an ambiguously tan and indeterminate skin tone for his mannequins.²³ The figures could be of any ethnicity, and the artist uses this strategy to avoid simplistic conclusions about identity and race.

²⁰ Yinka Shonibare, *MBE: Jardin d'amour*, 17.

²¹ Yinka Shonibare, *MBE: Jardin d'amour*, 25.

²² Nancy Hynes and John Picton, "Yinka Shonibare," *African Arts* 34:3 (2001): 63.

²³ See video and photo installation *Odile and Odette*, 2005. In these works, Shonibare uses one black ballerina and one white ballerina dancing the famous roles of Swan Lake as reflections of each other in a mirror. He deliberately contrasts these ballerinas' skin tones, whereas his mannequins are always shown as an ambiguous tan color,

Parodied Canonical Works

In many of Shonibare's works, he parodies recognizable canonical works of the Western art historical tradition. Recall his *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, where the heroine of the painting is transformed into a life-size headless mannequin at the height of her swing (Figure 2). The mannequin still dons period costume, but Shonibare has meticulously re-fashioned it in his "African" wax-print fabric. The works of Western visual art that Shonibare chooses to re-create often center around notions of decadence, luxury, and extreme wealth made possible by the subjugation of Africans and other (future) colonial subjects. His eighteenth-century appropriated works serve as case in point.

In discussing his French Rococo re-creations, the artist has drawn parallels between the luxurious Rococo lifestyle and our contemporary moment, in which the developing world hungers for the wealth of the developed West.²⁴ Shonibare states, "...what I am really doing is showing very wealthy Europeans in very wealthy clothes, but because I changed their clothes into African textiles, I give an indication that the luxury that they enjoy, the labour of the making of the clothes is supplied by others who are less fortunate ... [It] is a way to bring the two together, using ... the eighteenth century as a metaphor, although these things are actually here now."²⁵ The period just preceding the French Revolution was characterized by extreme affluence and decadence among the aristocracy. The reign of Louis XV, as well as his successor, Louis XVI, and the Rococo palace of Versailles embody this notion of excess. This extravagant era came to an abrupt halt with the French Revolution in 1789, when the lower classes rose up and

avoiding easy conclusions about identity and race. Yinka Shonibare, MBE, Artist lecture on occasion of exhibition opening, *Odile and Odette*, ACA Gallery, SCAD, Atlanta, 10 Jan. 2008.

²⁴ Yinka Shonibare, MBE: *Jardin d'amour*, 12.

²⁵ Yinka Shonibare, MBE: *Jardin d'amour*, 12.

rebelled against the aristocratic class. Many prominent aristocrats of the Rococo era lost their heads to the guillotine. Shonibare's use of Rococo paintings and his clever beheading of the characters can serve as a grim warning to those who benefit unduly and as a biting critique of the economic disparities between the global upper and lower classes.

His works are more than visually appealing; Shonibare's works are extremely alluring. They have an undeniable playfulness about them, a *joie de vivre*. These inanimate mannequins court the viewer with their brightly colored wax-print period costumes, and their often lighthearted postures taken from familiar Western works entertain passing viewers. Shonibare's installations can provide astute viewers with a sort of nostalgic comfort. Shonibare explains, "As an artist, it remains always important for me that the audience can engage both intellectually and aesthetically with the work of art, so that the enjoyment of the work is very much part of the process; and the poetic side of it, i.e. the overlapping of different things, is very much at the essence of the work."²⁶ The cloth may seem out of place, but the lavish costumes still beguile the eye and allow the viewer to linger with pleasure on these life-size installations. The critique, then, comes with the beheading of these familiar characters. Viewers are forced to grapple with this violent suggestion, as well as its brutal equalizing effect.

Shonibare's installations may be playful and visually flirtatious, but they are also ambiguous. The artist utilizes many layers of critique: he appropriates familiar canonical works of art, but his re-fashioning of familiar scenes verges on parody. Shonibare's use of conceptually complex wax-print fabrics adds a further critical layer, as do his ambiguously tan, beheaded mannequins. By using stereotypical elements of both Africa and the West, Shonibare suggests an

²⁶ Yinka Shonibare, *MBE: Jardin d'amour*, 26.

ironic interdependency, not perceptible on the surface of things, only accessible through deeper analysis.

Multivalent Readings of Fragonard

In the past several years, Shonibare has utilized many well known European works of art for his installations. But how much understanding of the original works of art can be assumed? Is only a generic familiarity necessary, or do shifting meanings of the original work affect the viewer's understanding of these re-creations? To explore this question, Shonibare's works after Fragonard's *Progress of Love* will be interrogated.

Viewers' understandings of the original canonical works of art can affect the meanings of Shonibare's re-imaginings. Some assumptions of the Rococo period will be illustrated, in order to understand how Shonibare's re-creations function for the general viewer who recognizes the link between the contemporary installations and the original eighteenth-century paintings. Art historian Mary Sheriff provides a historical understanding of the attitudes towards the Rococo period throughout the centuries, "By 1792 Rococo paintings, already condemned as mannered luxury products, were taken as symbolic of the oppressive system being crushed by the revolution."²⁷ She explains that this rejection of Rococo coincided with a decline in the market and shifting ideologies brought to the fore during the formation of the First Republic of France.

The Rococo style is often treated as synonymous with the *ancien régime*, which was thought of as tyrannical, avaricious, and oppressive to supporters of the Revolution.²⁸ To be pro-Republican France and decidedly against the *ancien régime* meant abandoning and at times even condemning much of the formerly popular Rococo. By 1820, Sheriff contends, Fragonard was

²⁷ Mary D. Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 1.

²⁸ Sheriff, 7.

considered “a painter of frivolous subjects, of love scenes *à la mode*.”²⁹ Critics believed his talent was wasted on licentious subjects, rather than uplifted by the higher genres. In short, Rococo was remembered as a “disappointment of French painting,” with Fragonard as its standard-bearer.³⁰

The Rococo period that flourished with the reign of Louis XV has often been considered little more than insignificant. This attitude is perpetuated in art history survey books, where the Rococo is afforded little attention and sometimes is even presented as the dying breaths of the Baroque: “a degeneration of previously virile forms,” in Sheriff’s abbreviation of generalist literature. In fact, the term “rococo” is sometimes generalized and used as the late phases of all periods and styles.³¹ The Rococo is often described as being frivolous, coquettish, decorative, lighthearted, and vacant of all higher meaning, as compared to its predecessor the Baroque and its successor the Neoclassical.³² General assessments of the period at large, and Fragonard in particular, still conform to this one-dimensional reading of the Rococo style. Returning to Shonibare’s re-imaginings of Fragonard’s Rococo works, then, is this the meaning Shonibare means to harness? The superficial understanding of Fragonard, as just outlined, does seem to complement Shonibare’s concerns: the excess and uneven distribution of wealth of the *ancien régime* can critically mirror the same disparity between the contemporary developed and developing worlds.

Shonibare’s first foray into the French Rococo was in 2001, with his reinvention of Fragonard’s *The Swing*. Both Fragonard’s original painting and Shonibare’s installation have

²⁹ Sheriff, 3.

³⁰ Sheriff, 4.

³¹ Sheriff, 27.

³² Sheriff, 28.

already been discussed, but it is instructive to take special note of Shonibare's variations. Fragonard's painting is self-contained; the audience is privy to the entire scene but plays no active role. Shonibare, however, brings this scene to life, and places the viewer in the optimal position: the viewer becomes the target for the heroine's coquettish shoe toss. By excluding the young woman's older husband as well as her young lover, Shonibare charges the seemingly innocent eighteenth-century scene with contemporary notions of the gaze and voyeurism.³³ Here Shonibare enables the viewer to partake in this illicit act, but only self consciously so. In enabling the viewer's peek up the mannequin's skirt, does Shonibare assume a male gaze? Or perhaps he means to force the audience into an uncomfortable position as unflinchingly voyeuristic, where issues of gender and sexuality take center stage. However, his decapitation of the character invites ambiguity into the scene: she can no longer watch us, as we watch her.

Shonibare's re-dressing of the heroine in "African" wax-print fabrics is inescapable; her dress suddenly becomes an anomaly, not just an item of recognizable, though forgettable, period dress. The figure, too, becomes ironically codified: the cut and style of the dress is decidedly eighteenth-century European, but the material signifies a very distant reality—that of Africa. Most often this wax-print fabric is not associated with a specific location; it becomes a generalized and detemporalized signifier of the continent of Africa, nothing more, even though the actual fabrics are contemporaneous with the present day. The fabric, as has already been articulated, challenges the complex notion of authenticity. The juxtaposition between high Western (eighteenth-century) subject matter and mass-produced (contemporary) African textiles reveals how Shonibare is playing with symbols, meaning, and implication. He utilizes cultural

³³ Virginia Button, *The Turner Prize* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 208.

resonances that seem pointedly anachronistic, though at the same time are jarringly contemporary, leaving viewers to contemplate and make sense of this temporal disjunction.

Shonibare's second venture into the oeuvre of Fragonard was his exhibition, *Jardin d'Amour*, (2007) which featured an indoor labyrinth with three groups of lovers (Figures 3-5). The installations were inspired by Fragonard's paintings from the series, *The Progress of Love* (Figures 6-9). The title seems to have been applied to Fragonard's works after this commissioned series was rejected by Madame du Barry upon completion in 1773. The series was replaced by Neoclassical artist Joseph Marie-Vien's series of the same title. The title, *Progress*, implies a narrative; Fragonard's canvases, however, seem to show four sets of young lovers, instead of two lovers followed through four scenes. The *Progress* has been the subject of many commentaries over the centuries; perhaps the most convincing explanation is that there is no narrative at all, just paradigmatic aspects of the game of love, which underscores the misnomer of the title.³⁴

This lack of narrative or progress epitomizes much of the Rococo era. Aristocrats were able to "pursue love" endlessly, as lovers were "substitutable, repeatable entities, and the game was as infinitely renewable as aristocratic fashion."³⁵ Fragonard's cycle has no beginning and no end, but perpetual temporality. The visual inconsistencies in the depiction of young lovers' hair colors, coiffures, facial features, and costumes may also parallel their inconstant nature in the game of love. The flirtatious manner of Fragonard's paintings points to an element of irresponsibility that aristocrats were able to enjoy.

Fragonard's four canvases are known today as *The Pursuit*, *The Meeting*, *The Lover Crowned*, and *The Love Letters* (Figures 6-9). Each scene depicts a pair of lovers in luscious

³⁴ Sheriff, 68.

³⁵ Lynne Kirby, "Fragonard's *The Pursuit of Love*," *Rutgers Art Review* (1982): 78.

Rococo gardens partaking in different activities associated with courtship. Shonibare has re-created three of these scenes of lovers in his installation: *The Pursuit*, *The Crowning*, after Fragonard's *The Lover Crowned*, and *The Confession*, after Fragonard's *The Love Letters*; he omits *The Meeting* (Figures 3-5). Shonibare depicts only the two main characters of each scene, excluding such figures as the young girl's friends from the first, the artist from the second, and the spaniel from the third. Typically, the lovers all lose their heads and wear sumptuous clothing tailored of wax-print fabric.

If one chooses to delve below the surface of these Rococo works, as contemporary feminist art historians have done, Shonibare's use of Fragonard takes on new and varied meanings. By reassessing Fragonard's works, Shonibare's use of the seemingly unproblematic "lite" Rococo is called into question. Art historian Lynne Kirby focuses her analysis of Fragonard's series on the features that became "unacceptable" to both the waning *ancien régime* and the bourgeoisie but are still consistently treated as devoid of meaning. She points to details in which Fragonard expresses an element of resistance to authority, through the means of (female) sexuality.³⁶

Although Rococo art is often dismissed as frivolous artifice, in reality, notorious aspects of Rococo works of art became unacceptable as they challenged figures of authority. Kirby argues that the Rococo style in general celebrated the display of women. Males are placed at the edge of pictorial activity and function as supporting details to the exhibiting of pretty young women.³⁷ Compositionally, Fragonard's series provides a case in point. The young women in each scene are well lit and placed at the center of each painting. For example, in *The Pursuit*, Fragonard has arranged three young women in a pyramid-shape composition, with the main character at the

³⁶ Kirby, 63.

³⁷ Kirby, 64.

apex (Figure 6). Her arms are thrown wide in surprise at seeing her suitor, and she garners the most visual power.

Shonibare's installations, on the other hand, appear to treat the male and female figures more equally. In the contemporary artist's rendition of *The Pursuit*, the young woman's friends are omitted, leaving the scene to her and her suitor (Figure 3). Her suitor motions to her from behind the bushes, and the young woman is surprised into a dramatic posture. Even if the young woman is still the center of attention, by leaving out other compositional elements, Shonibare's installations place more emphasis on the dynamics of the couple.

In addition, Kirby argues that certain areas of the female body are considered erotically charged, and deployment of this power gives women the upper hand.³⁸ Here, Fragonard focuses on these sexually-charged extremities: the feet, the hands, the head and neck, as well as the breasts. By placing the young women in postures that throw out these attributes for the viewer to appreciate, women garner more sexual power. Arms are spread wide and chests are thrust forward, delicate feet peak out from beneath folds of skirts, and long, pearly necks are exposed and admired. The female body does take center stage in Fragonard's work. The young women are the most active, the more elevated, the central characters. The period clothing, too, plays an important part in highlighting these areas: lacy collars draw attention to the graceful necks and aptly placed bows and flowers accentuate plunging necklines.³⁹

In Shonibare's re-creations, however, the women's bodies are eclipsed by his use of wax-print tailored garments. The bright, colorful fabrics delight and entice the eye, and overshadow the mannequins' visual presence. Especially since the mannequins are headless, Westerners are

³⁸ Kirby, 65.

³⁹ Kirby, 65.

conditioned to overlook the finer details of these dummies. What is important to such a consumer culture, instead, is what they display for visual consumption. Shonibare's re-imaginings spotlight the wax-print period costumes and offer them up to be visually consumed, at the expense of the characters represented.

Intriguingly, the owners of these female bodies on display never acknowledge the voyeur's gaze: the young women in each of Fragonard's scenes never look back to recognize that she is being viewed. She is playful, coquettish, and ultimately, self-serving. Kirby argues here that there is an erotic charge in this lack of visual recognition, which mirrors a familiar eighteenth-century literary trope in which aristocratic women faint in order to enjoy sex without taking conscious responsibility for it.⁴⁰ The importance here is the purpose of sex: for eighteenth-century aristocrats, sexual practices had little to do with reproductive sex and everything to do with pleasure. Marriage was a legal contract that concerned itself with the transferal of estates, properties, privileges, and family names.⁴¹ One found sexual pleasure in extra-marital affairs, not with one's spouse. This viewpoint was rejected by bourgeoisie and Enlightenment thinkers alike, where sex was only supposedly concerned with procreation. Therefore, one "unacceptable" aspect of Fragonard's *Progress of Love* was the theme of sexual pleasure, and by extension the resistance to the procreative demands.⁴² Fragonard's series serves no higher end—no didactic, moral function—than its playful, decorative self.⁴³ But that does not mean his works are devoid of content, quite the opposite: their delight in excess, narrative ambiguity, and pleasure all characterize the Rococo era and set it apart from its predecessors and successors.

⁴⁰ Kirby, 68-69.

⁴¹ Carol Duncan, "Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art," *Art Bulletin* (1973): 572.

⁴² Kirby, 70.

⁴³ Kirby, 78.

The fact that the women in Fragonard's scenes all refuse the gazes of their suitors reflects the typical features of coquetterie: insincerity, infidelity, and equivocation. Coquettes play at signifying one thing and meaning another, and the lack of eye contact establishes this game of veiled intentions.⁴⁴ Also, coquettes maintain power: the girl may be pursued and visually dominated, but as Kirby argues, she is never really "caught." Who then holds the power? This ambiguity in gender relations and of gendered power is also "unacceptable" to bourgeois and Enlightenment thinkers. Fragonard's are not images of hetero-normative authority, which was sought at the time of painting. Females here hold the power to distract male energy from more productive, useful investments to their own passing whims and fancies.⁴⁵ Conversely, the role of the gaze is undermined and made ambiguous by the beheading of Shonibare's mannequins, but the light-hearted nature remains strong in his re-creations.

It is clear that the young women of Fragonard's paintings hold much of the visual power in the scenes. Take for example *The Lover Crowned*: in both Fragonard's original and Shonibare's re-creation, the male figure is physically subordinate; he is positioned lower and receives the action of the female figure (Figures 4 and 7). She holds the authority to consummate the relationship, but her motion is uncertain: she crowns, or does not crown—her gesture stops in mid air. In Fragonard's painting, the couple is understood to be posing for an artist, who will memorialize the scene. The suitor gazes lovingly up at the young woman, and her gaze is directed towards the artist.

In Shonibare's installation, the characters are without their heads, so their gazes are irrevocably interrupted. He has also omitted the artist, which augments the most striking

⁴⁴ Kirby, 71.

⁴⁵ Kirby, 73.

difference in the scene: the ambiguous gesture. The young woman has no reason to suspend her action in Shonibare's installation; the scene remains in a perpetual indeterminate state. Shonibare has also retained allusions to musical instruments, present in Fragonard's original. However, the tambourine is re-upholstered in wax-print fabric that blatantly showcases the Chanel trademark. Perhaps Shonibare is drawing a comparison between music as a luxury pastime of the eighteenth-century aristocracy and the possession of designer labels in our own temporality. Both are reserved for the upper echelons and become signifiers of social status, though various forms (i.e. peasant folk music and so-called "knock-offs") are available for consumption by the lower classes. The appearance of the well-known Western trademark in "African" wax-print fabric also adds another level of exchange and interdependency between the West and the developing world. Once again, ambiguity takes center stage in Shonibare's work, augmented by Fragonard's Rococo anti-narratives.

Fragonard's *Love Letters* is often read as love soliciting the aid of friendship (Figure 8). But when considered in light of the coquetterie already discussed, this one-dimensional reading is unsatisfying: what kind of friendship is being represented? Friendship often functioned among the aristocracy as just one stage in the game of love. It could serve as a prelude to the sexual relationship, where the association may be said to be "platonic" even while parties nurse underlying sexual motivations. Indeed, Kirby recalls that the word *ami* doubled as "friend" and "lover" in eighteenth-century parlance.⁴⁶

Shonibare's *The Confession* also turns on this ambiguous relationship (Figure 5). Is the confession one of friendship, of love, or of sexual longing? Either way, the woman still maintains the power in the scene, and presumably also in the definition of the relationship.

⁴⁶ Kirby, 76.

Recall, though, that Fragonard's original series may not have any narrative intentions, just isolated scenes displaying moments in the pursuit of love. The work, then, remains open-ended and can function as many different moments in the game of love.

How then does Shonibare utilize his appropriated subject matter? Has he simply chosen social stereotypes and cultural icons to question accepted values systems in the West? If so, Shonibare's *The Swing (after Fragonard)* can be considered little more than an artful dressing-up of a recognizable coquette to implicate our own contemporary society in its sexual exploits (Figure 2). But why use eighteenth-century French examples? This historical period immediately preceding the French Revolution can be seen as emblematic of frivolous extravagance: the aristocracy enjoyed extreme wealth and luxury at the expense of the lower classes. Although trade with the continent of Africa did occur at this time, colonialism proper did not come to be until the late nineteenth century. The wax-print fabrics, too, were not marketed to the continent until the 1880s. Historically speaking, then, Shonibare is conflating many Victorian issues with the *ancien régime*. Can eighteenth-century French painting stand in for the entire Western world across time and space?

Perhaps Shonibare's critiques are not so closely linked to Fragonard's paintings. They rely on various levels of ambiguity, and multivalent readings of his works may be more productive than definitive associations. Shonibare's use of the wax-print fabric in relation to frivolous aristocratic scenes may be meant to simply underline the economic disparity and historical ties between the developed West and the developing world. Why indeed, choose French Rococo paintings as his points of reference? The truth lies in the visual pleasure. Shonibare is very true to Rococo aesthetic; his works share many of the same qualities, even when he is parodying other works and eras from the history of Western art. He, like Fragonard, revels in excess and

sumptuous scenes. Opulent period costumes, flirtatious episodes, and a play between revulsion and adoration are all at work for Shonibare, specifically here in his Fragonard-inspired works, but more generally as well. He is not simply critiquing or embracing Rococo aesthetic and meanings; he instead flits between the two. A more nuanced reading of the original Rococo works can inform interpretations of Shonibare's re-creations, though they are not necessary for the works to function. Shonibare's works both revel in and critique conspicuous consumption, simultaneously implicating his viewers in the same dilemma.

Yinka Shonibare's works are most often read as reflecting economic imbalances and the troubled relations between the colonial past and postcolonial present. However, as Shonibare appropriates recognizable Western works of art to create his life-size installations, it is instructive to analyze the way in which he uses such images. His works maintain high levels of ambiguity, in his use of historically and conceptually complex wax-print fabrics, his indeterminate, beheaded tan mannequins, and in his parodied scenes of canonical works of art. By combining references to Western high art traditions with "African" fabrics, Shonibare indicates an ironic interdependency through his visually delectable installations.

CHAPTER 4

WIM BOTHA: *MIELIEPAP PIETÀ*

South African artist Wim Botha has also used well-known Western works of art in his contemporary sculptures and installations. Botha's works often hinge on issues of authenticity and perceived reality. The artist plays with familiar imagery, such as religious icons, aristocratic crests, and other highly charged status symbols. Although Botha most often uses generic iconography in his work, he has also utilized specific canonical works of art.

Botha was born in Pretoria, South Africa, in 1974. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Visual Art from the University of Pretoria, and currently lives and works in Johannesburg. He has achieved great success in South Africa for an artist so early in his career, winning numerous awards and featuring in many group exhibitions. Botha was included in two major touring exhibitions: *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* and *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*. He has also been the subject of five solo exhibitions in locations across South Africa in the last seven years. Most notably, Botha was named the Standard Bank Young Artist for Visual Art in 2005. According to the Standard Bank's website, "These awards acknowledge and applaud the tenacity and originality of young South African artists, and seek to actively encourage, promote and develop their aspirations."¹ As the 2005 award recipient, Botha's exhibition, *A Premonition of War*, traveled to seven locations around South Africa.

In his *Mieliepap Pietà* of 2004, Botha re-created one of the best-known works of Christian religious sculpture, Michelangelo Buonarroti's *Pietà* from 1498-99, in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome (Figures 10 and 11). This *Pietà* is often referred to as a triumph for the Renaissance artist early in

¹ "Standard Bank Young Artist Awards 2007," 2007, Standard Bank, 8 Feb. 2008
<http://www.standardbank.co.za/SBIC/Frontdoor_02_01/0,2454,10293765_23859501_0,00.html>.

his career. Michelangelo's life-size marble sculpture depicts Mary, the Virgin Mother, holding the limp body of her son draped across her lap. The moment, though not biblical, is understood to take place after Christ was crucified and taken down from the cross. Mary's head and eyes tilt down reverently, and her calm, solemn face draws viewers to join her in contemplating the limp figure on her lap. The subject matter clearly references the Christian religious tradition.

Michelangelo's portrayal suggests somber mourning, where a mother quietly grieves the loss of her son. Stylistically, Michelangelo's sculptural expertise is apparent in the many drapes and folds of Mary's clothing, as well as the lifelike, though beautified, appearance of both Mary and Jesus. Beyond its religious function, Michelangelo's *Pietà* is often cited as one of Western art's great masterpieces. Its fame has made it more of a recognizable icon in itself rather than a symbol for the moment it depicts. This difference, I believe, is crucial to Botha's use and re-motivation of the image.

Beyond Michelangelo

Botha painstakingly re-created a mirror-image of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, down to the original's exact dimensions. However, instead of chiseled marble, Botha utilized a somewhat unusual artistic medium—maize meal. Maize meal, a corn-based porridge, is a staple of many South Africans' diets. Botha first created an armature of metal rods to give the sculpture its structure. This armature was covered with maize meal combined with an epoxy resin to create a congealed mixture. Botha then chiseled away at the mixture to reveal small details. When on view, *Mieliepap Pietà* is installed on a simple steel platform, akin to scaffolding (Figure 12).² Michelangelo's original is installed on an elaborate marble plinth, and the difference in display

² See installation views in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, 2 vols. (New York: Museum for African Art, 2004), vol. 2, 26-27, and from the exhibition *A Premonition of War*, online at www.michaelstevenson.com.

provides a striking difference. The steel scaffolding recalls construction work, which is impermanent and transitory. The work, too, created of maize meal, is much more impermanent than its marble counterpart. Botha explains, “It is an honest and practical inference, it conveys a low-budget simplicity and devoids the image even further of the original’s implications and its esteem.”³ The simple structure also destabilizes the work, as it seems far too weak to support the faux-marble sculpture. Botha continues, “It is jarring, at odds with what one would expect for such a work and setting. Visually it creates an (imperfect, flawed) impression of floating, weightlessness. There are contradictions here, as elsewhere, but they are conscious ones, along with possibly many others...”⁴ The presentation of *Mieliepap Pietà* serves to further complicate and challenge the viewer’s assumed response.

Mieliepap Pietà is not a clear simulation of the original, as Botha interferes with essential characteristics of the original and intends to create a different meaning. In querying the artist about a satisfactory term to describe this work, he suggested the invention of “conceptual de-creation,”⁵ which I understand to incorporate his underlying meanings as well as his attempt to break through the understandings of Michelangelo’s original creation. He has not innocently or deceptively created a doppelganger; instead, he has harnessed the *Pietà*’s visual and ideological power and used the image to incite a realignment of thought. For semantic ease, I will refer to Botha’s *Mieliepap Pietà* as a simulacrum, as this term best defines Botha’s use of a canonical work of art, but I will interrogate the function of this work as it exceeds the purpose of a simple simulacrum.

³ Wim Botha, “Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta,” email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

⁴ Wim Botha, “Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta,” email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

⁵ Wim Botha, “Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta,” email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

From afar, Botha's re-creation closely resembles the original (Figures 10 and 11). Even though it is a mirror image—thus reversed in orientation—viewers may be momentarily fooled by its strikingly similar appearance. It appears as almost a simulation of the original, and because the original work of art is so recognizable, many viewers may not even notice the mirror reversal of the image. Upon closer inspection, however, Botha's usual artistic material makes itself known (Figure 13). Instead the high degree of finish and smooth polish achieved by Michelangelo, Botha's *Mieliepap Pietà* combines areas of high finish with areas left rougher in appearance. Though Botha has confirmed that the maize-meal mixture is a limiting material with which to work, with time and effort the artist realized it would have been possible to make a "near perfect copy."⁶ But Botha's real interest was not one of imitation or display of sheer technical prowess; rather, he has consciously juxtaposed these finishes to allow the viewer to gain access to his underlying concerns. Botha explains, "It is more of a dance of associations, of contradictory implications, of destabilizing an entrenched image, of cleansing meaning from a loaded icon."⁷ Therefore, the contradicting rough and smooth finish of the *Mieliepap Pietà* serves as an integral characteristic of Botha's larger conceptual intention.

Function of Simulacrum

It is important, too, that Botha chose a specific work of art to recreate. Throughout his oeuvre, Botha has explored powerfully-charged religious and status iconography. For example, in *Table I* of 2003, Botha's composition replaces traditional animals associated with crests and coats-of-arms with hyenas (Figure 14). Instead of noble lions and eagles, Botha uses a violent scavenger. By altering the animal, Botha recasts traditional upstanding heraldic imagery in a less

⁶ Wim Botha, "Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta," email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

⁷ Wim Botha, "Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta," email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

dignified, more explicitly aggressive mode. Botha has also used general religious imagery. In his *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* of 2001, Botha created a Christ-figure, as if crucified on an absent cross, out of bibles and surveillance equipment (Figure 15). Portions of the bibles are left intact and are recognizable, and red stains reference Christ's wounds. The bibles are printed in the official languages of South Africa and draw attention to the complex history embodied by today's existence of eleven such languages. One facet of apartheid was linguistic oppression: during apartheid, only English and Afrikaans were official languages, and others were both unacknowledged and discouraged. Considered alongside the surveillance equipment, *Commune: Suspension of Disbelief* references apartheid's oppression and control. The mediation of religious beliefs (and texts) is also alluded to in this work. The two aforementioned works appropriate generic imagery, which turn on understandings of deep-seated religious and aristocratic associations. With *Mieliepap Pietà*, Botha enters into a critique of art history, and draws attention to the predominance of religious imagery in art history, when seen in relation to his entire oeuvre.⁸ Beyond choosing a particular work from the history of art, Botha has chosen a very famous sculpture by Michelangelo. The work is instantly recognizable, and viewers already possess some pre-existing knowledge or opinions about the work. Most viewers will know of the work through numerous photographic reproductions, even if they have never traveled to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The *Mieliepap Pietà*'s significance transcends the simple interplay between original and simulacrum. The moment depicted and the composition of the figures' pose both resonate with a certain universality. In Botha's words, "How many times have we seen photos in press or elsewhere of two people in this same pose, same moment of anguish or sorrow or tenderness?"

⁸ Wim Botha, "Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta," email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

The famous photograph of Hector Pietersen being carried away during the Soweto uprising, images by Gideon Mendel [South African photographer] or AIDS sufferers being tended, Palestinian fathers holding their slain kids. Real drama, real human tragedy seems moulded to this format: The surviving cradling the slain.”⁹

The image of Hector Pietersen would surely be familiar to the majority of South Africans (Figure 16). The photograph was taken by South African photographer Sam Nzima on June 16, 1976, when police opened fire on a group of schoolchildren who were protesting the imposition of the Afrikaans language in township schools in Soweto. Tensions had been rising since February of that year, when teachers who refused to cooperate were dismissed. Some schools went on strike in May, and on June 16, hundreds of children from three schools marched on Matsike High. Police ordered their dispersal, but instead they began singing “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika,” which means “God Bless Africa” in Xhosa. During apartheid, the song became somewhat of an unofficial national anthem to the suffering and oppressed.¹⁰ Police then opened fire, killing at least three and injuring a dozen. Thirteen-year-old Hector Pieterse was one of those shot and killed, and Nzima’s photograph captures the moment when Mbuyisa Makhubo, another student, carries a limp Pieterse, accompanied by Pieterse’s sister, Antoinette, fleeing the scene for help. The next day the government reaffirmed their language policy, and attempted to “maintain order at all costs.”¹¹ The final death toll of June 17, 1976, was 174 Africans and two whites, with hundreds more killings in the coming months.¹² The photograph became an iconic

⁹ Wim Botha, “Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta,” email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

¹⁰ Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2004), 23.

¹¹ Clark, 76. A portion of a quote by South African Prime Minister John Vorster.

¹² Clark, 76.

image of this 1976 Soweto Uprising, and more broadly an image that displayed the brutality of the apartheid government. Pieterse's body positioning in Makhubo's arms literally mirrors that of Christ's in the *Pieta*, and replicates the positioning of Botha's *Mieliepap Pieta*. When considered in light of one another, *Mieliepap Pieta*, then, begins to shed its specific religious context and becomes a universal icon for these tragic human experiences, and once again becomes a highly-charged image.

In interviews, Botha talks about Michelangelo's original work as a reference to understanding and accepting some things to be inevitable. Michelangelo's figure of Mary is not crying out in apparent anguish; instead, she is calm and almost accepting of the tragic events that have just transpired. Botha links this acceptance to an inevitability of ideology, and by extension, to martyrdom, saying, "Wherever there is an ideology there will be martyrs, if you believe strong enough. You mourn the events, and you mourn the sacrifice, but it becomes a justification in itself of the cause."¹³ When considered as a parallel to the Soweto Uprising and the "martyrdom" of Hector Pieterse, these tragic and unjust deaths are motivators in spurring change. Though images of mourning abound, Botha argues that the *Pieta* has combined mourning and loss with acceptance. Mary's son's death is justifiable, in a sense, because it is for a larger cause, just as Hector Pieterse's death was not in vain, for the apartheid system was finally dismantled in 1994.¹⁴

¹³ "Wim Botha," interviewed by Tracy Murinik, in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, 2 vols. (New York: Museum for African Art, 2004), vol. 1, 67.

¹⁴ On June 16, 2002, the Hector Pieterse Memorial and Museum opened near the place where Pieterse was shot. The museum and memorial are to commemorate those that died in the 1976 Soweto Uprising.

Marble versus Maize Meal

In *Mieliepap Pietà*, Botha used maize meal instead of marble to create his simulacrum (Figure 13). By changing the sculpture's medium, the artist accomplishes several things. First, Botha has replaced a durable, expensive, historical artistic medium with a cheap, local food source. In doing this, Botha has called for a reinterpretation of the artwork's meaning. Botha states, "I was drawn to the material for its rich implications, and was pleasantly surprised at its effectiveness in simulating marble, for one, and the conceptual implications of using a staple food to simulate an expensive, elite material, of using something of essential value to simulate a medium that is largely useless apart from its decorative functions."¹⁵ Maize meal is very cheap to purchase but incredibly valuable, as it meets the basic dietary needs of millions of people everyday. Marble, on the other hand, is expensive but quite frivolous in that its only use is superfluous decoration. And because marble occurs only in natural quarries, it is often only available at a great cost. Historically, this valuable stone has been reserved for elite patrons or projects, due to its expense. As far as meeting the everyday needs of the masses, marble is quite trivial. Maize meal, on the other hand, is inherently precious as a useful commodity, as it can physically nurture.

Botha makes full use of irony here, because in using an inexpensive material, Botha also destroys the works' perceived monetary value, as "high" works of art have historically been made of traditional (and costly) materials, such as marble. But the maize meal used here can no longer provide sustenance to people and becomes effectively useless when combined with epoxy resin—it can no longer serve its original purpose of nourishment. The maize meal is transformed

¹⁵ Wim Botha, "Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta," email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

from utility into expensive “indulgence,” and the sculpture’s original decorative function remains.¹⁶

Botha’s use of a South African food staple is also conceptually important. His choice of an artistic material that can physically nourish corresponds to the spiritual nourishment found in the Eucharist. The Body of Christ in host form is ingested by adherents to Christianity. Of course the sculpture Botha re-imagines is Christian in content, as has already been discussed. By choosing a material with local resonances, Botha effectively imbues his work with local significance. Just as the subject matter and composition can mirror the tragedies in South Africa’s past, maize meal can refer to ongoing struggles to meet daily needs. Complex history and contemporary problems are referenced through this simple shift in artistic material. Interestingly, maize meal is not indigenous to the continent of Africa but originates in the Americas. It has been in a way “naturalized” as an African, and particularly a southern African, food staple. Therefore, Botha’s use of maize meal can somewhat parallel Shonibare’s use of wax-print fabric.

On Exhibition

Although Botha conceived of *Mieliepap Pietà* in 1999, the sculpture was not realized until 2003. It was first displayed in the exhibition, *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*. This exhibition was organized by the Museum for African Art and encompassed two venues: the Museum’s gallery space and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. Artists were invited to visit and create works for both spaces that would be shown on exhibition. Although the exhibition and space did not influence the conception of Botha’s particular work, it was well-suited to both. Botha chose to exhibit *Mieliepap Pietà* at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in order to demonstrate their similarities (Figure 12). First, the

¹⁶ Wim Botha, “Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta,” email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

status of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine as the world's largest Gothic cathedral rivals St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, where Michelangelo's *Pietà* resides.¹⁷ Both *Pietàs* were housed in alcoves to the right of the entrance. Botha's simulacrum parallels the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in that they are both "colossal fraud[s]."¹⁸ Botha's simulates a canonical Renaissance work of art and the Cathedral appropriates a style of architecture, Gothic, that derived several hundred years before the Cathedral's construction. Both the cathedral and Botha's *Pietà* are imperfect and unfinished and even possess scaffolding. In Botha's comparison, "In some ways my *Pietà* perfectly aligns with the cathedral, both being imitations that have a more universalising function, where St. Johns is multi-denominational in approach..."¹⁹ The relation between Botha's *Mieliepap Pietà* and its original exhibition location, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, can effectively be read in relationship to expose their mutual similarities.

Wim Botha's *Mieliepap Pietà* accomplishes several things. It functions as a mirror-image simulacrum, or, in the artist's words, a "conceptual de-creation" of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Botha created his *Pietà* out of maize meal instead of marble, a local South African food staple that alters the meaning of the work and imbues it with local significance. Botha deliberately left some parts of his simulacrum rough, so that viewers are able to puncture its artifice. He also deliberately chose this particular work for its powerful image and for its ability to transcend its specific religious theme. Botha relates the *Pietà* to the icon of the Soweto Uprising, the photograph of Hector Pieterse, a victim of apartheid-era police violence. Botha's primary

¹⁷ James A. Kowalski and Tom Miller, "Preface: Cathedral of St. John the Divine," in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, 2 vols. (New York: Museum for African Art, 2004), vol. 1, 12.

¹⁸ Wim Botha, "Re: Query about Mieliepap Pietà," email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

¹⁹ Wim Botha, "Re: Query about Mieliepap Pietà," email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

motivation for this work is “an experiment in transformation, of cleansing of meaning, of democratizing a paramount image of exclusivity.”²⁰ He appropriates the power of a canonical Western work of art, interferes and complicates its original meaning, and prompts viewers to reconsider unquestioned beliefs. He states, “For me suspicion is a major part of it: adding to something that’s unquestioned in order to get you to reconsider. It’s very valuable because people don’t reconsider, they don’t revisit firmly held beliefs, except when forced to by extreme circumstances, as in South Africa.”²¹

²⁰ Wim Botha, “Re: Query about Mieliepap Pieta,” email to the author, 5 Feb. 2008.

²¹ “Wim Botha.” 71.

CHAPTER 5

STRANGELOVE: *AFRICAN DAVID*

In 2005, Strangelove created an updated version of another iconic sculpture by Michelangelo, *David* (Figure 17). In their photograph, *African David*, Strangelove have replaced the monumental marble sculpture with a black male model, replicating the sculpture's *contrapposto* stance, arm positioning, and intense facial expression (Figure 18). The contemporary image imitates Michelangelo's Renaissance masterpiece, with several unmistakable differences.

Strangelove is a South African conceptual design team comprised of Ziemek Pater and Carlo Gibson. Based in Johannesburg, they have been designing and creating together since 2001. Strangelove transcends many creative boundaries, using fashion as a launching point into various artistic venues. Strangelove designs high fashion runway collections; these conceptual clothing designs comprise the collection, Avant-Garde. In their own description from their website, they describe Avant-Garde as: "This range of clothing reveals where our passions lie. We like art, and we like it even more when art gets in our clothes. Our flair finds full expression in this format."¹ They also design a ready-to-wear clothing line, labeled Avant-Hard, which in their words, "Combine[s] the harsh elements of our African urban environment with the delicate process of design."² In addition, they also design clothing on commission, which, like their Avant-Hard collection, "Provide[s] clothing for individuals looking for an authentic, original means of expression with their clothes ... Our work is epitomized by our focus on cut, fit, and detailing with a preference for expert tailoring. Wear it."³ Though they maintain a retail shop and

¹ "Strangelove," 2008, 20 Jan. 2008 <<http://www.strangelove.co.za/gallery/albums.php>>.

² "Strangelove," 2008, 20 Jan. 2008 <http://www.strangelove.co.za/page.php?a_id=19>.

³ "Strangelove," 2008, 20 Jan. 2008 <http://www.strangelove.co.za/page.php?a_id=19>.

have been highly acclaimed at South African Fashion Week,⁴ Strangelove has also made their presence known in the art world.

The conceptual aspects of the design duo's work are showcased through their involvement in the creative art world. They have collaborated with others on numerous performance projects. In explanation of these collaborative works, Carlo Gibson and Ziemek Pater state: "In order to achieve the best expression of any subject we undertake to discuss, we create stories, each of which wants to be told in its own special way. Once we have outlined the story, the creative process takes us into discussions with professionals from various fields, in order for the right kind of mediums to be part of the presentation. Hence collaborations with other artists and specialists have become our preferred [mode of working], where our function is to create the story, and subsequently bring it to life by guiding the ensuing creative process."⁵

In two such works, Strangelove created conceptual fashion designs for a piece by South African dancer Nelisiwe Xaba, who choreographs poignant performances inspired by Strangelove's conceptual garments. Xaba choreographed a work based on the legacy of Saartjie Baartman, entitled *They look at me and that's all they think* (Figure 19). The performance is based on Strangelove's conceptual fashion design garment that consciously mimics the amplified curves of the "Hottentot Venus," Saartjie Baartman (Figure 20).⁶

⁴ In 2002, Strangelove presented their conceptual clothing line, "Wind," at South African Fashion Week, where they were awarded honors for Best Men's Wear and Best Stand. "Strangelove," 2008, 20 Jan. 2008 <http://www.strangelove.co.za/page.php?a_id=18>.

⁵ Strangelove, "Objects, Agents, and Spaces of Circulation," Carter Conference Series, in conjunction with the 13th Annual Arts Council of the African Studies Association Triennial, University of Florida, Gainesville, 31 Mar. 2007.

⁶ Saartjie Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman who was taken to Europe in 1810 and exhibited for her steatopygia (an enlargement of the behind). After her death, a plaster cast of her body was put on display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1982. Baartman has become a symbol of black sexuality and its exploitation by racist colonial practices. For further information, see Z. S. Strother's "Display of the Body Hottentot," in *Africans on Stage: Studies in Ethnological Show Business*, ed. Bernth Lindfors (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1-61.

In another work entitled *Plasticization*, Xaba's routine is based on a clever manipulation of Strangelove's China bag-based garment (Figure 21). The work playfully explores the man-made nature of plastic, the (plastic) materialism of society, and the importance of (plastic) condoms to protect oneself in the fight against AIDS. Strangelove has also transformed aspects of their conceptual designs into conceptual works of art. They have created an entire series of work focused on the China bag, which are cheap, omnipresent woven plastic bags. The bags play an important role to many in South Africa, including migrant laborers and traveling traders. Carlo Gibson and Ziemek Pater explain the impetus and rationale for utilizing the China bags, "On a global scale, the China bag is a common denominator between different peoples hailing from similar socio-economic groups. Thanks to its low price, the China bag has in its own way colonized most continents of the globe...[This] seemingly basic item begins to represent emotional content...and as such, is ideally positioned to be further transformed by Strangelove into an agent of creativity."⁷ In one critic's assessment, "Asked to define exactly what these pieces are...Carlo Gibson describes them as 'crazy creative things.' He could just as easily have called these props and costumes, with lives of their own, conceptual gold."⁸

Art and Fashion

Strangelove explodes notions of autonomous artistic practice and divisions between media. Where Shonibare may work in a number of recognized (high) artistic media, such as painting, sculpture, photography, video, and installation, Strangelove pushes media boundaries by using clothing and fashion. Their interest in design and their retail sales, private commissions, and runway shows function alongside their collaborations with performance artists and performers.

⁷ Strangelove, "Objects, Agents, and Spaces of Circulation."

⁸ Adrienne Sichel, "Women: The Fabric of Society," *Tonight*. 13 Feb. 2008
<<http://www.tonight.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=360&fArticleId=3381046>>.

Most of their work is not meant to be shown in a gallery, but rather experienced on the streets, seen on runways or even worn as everyday clothing.

Several exhibitions have explored the relations between art and fashion in the past two decades.⁹ *Art/Fashion* was first shown at the 1996 Biennale di Firenze and subsequently traveled to the SoHo Guggenheim in 1997. The exhibition traced the shifting relationship between art and fashion through various case studies throughout the twentieth century.¹⁰ A similar exhibition took place in 1998, at the Hayward Gallery in London. The exhibition, *Addressing the Century: 100 Years of Art & Fashion*, looked at the dynamics between art and fashion. Although thematically organized, the particular themes chosen seemed to simply mirror chronological eras.¹¹ In 2004, another exhibition addressed the exchange between fashion and art. *Fashionation*, at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, focused on three particularly productive periods of art and fashion exchange: surrealism in the 1920s, pop art in the 1960s, and the contemporary period, art since the early 1990s.¹² Though these exhibitions explored the exchange and influence between fashion and art, Strangelove has seamlessly blended these two in their practice. In their own words, “We prefer to think of ourselves as artists, using the wearable format of clothes as our medium. We are extensively involved in theatre, dance and other creative fields that stretch the

⁹ Interestingly, the new season of the Bravo TV series “Project Runway” has just had a challenge to create a garment based on a work of art [program first aired 13 Feb. 2008]. Designers were allowed to choose a work of art from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that was to inspire their garment. Although fashion and art have been taking inspiration from each other for centuries, this timely and evident example shows the efficacy of Strangelove’s interest in crossing and indeed breaking down creative barriers.

¹⁰ Eleanor Heartney, “20th-Century Threads: Fashion Art, SoHo Guggenheim,” *Art in America* 85:9 (1997): 43-45.

¹¹ See *Addressing the Century: 100 Years of Art & Fashion* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1998).

¹² Salka Hallström Bornold, *Fashionation* (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2004).

realm of clothing design to an intensely creative space. The left-of-centre appeal of our range has its roots in this attachment we have to the fascinating world of the arts.”¹³

Strangelove’s photograph of a re-fashioned *David* then is yet another example of the varied media and markets in which they work. *African David* is a collaborative piece with photographer Hannelie Coatzee and was displayed as a life-size photographic image (Figure 18). It is a re-creation of a familiar image, an adaptation from sculpture to photograph, and an appropriation of pose and subject matter. Strangelove’s *David* clearly recalls Michelangelo’s original from 1501-1504 (Figure 17). Michelangelo carved one of the masterpieces of his early career from a seemingly ruined block of marble. The monumental sculpture depicts David, from the biblical story of the young Israelite who unexpectedly defeated the giant, Goliath. Michelangelo’s sculpture depicts the moment of deep concentration before David slung the fatal rock. *David* stands *contrapposto* with his furrowed brow fixed on the task at hand. His full head of curls frames his intense face, which is turned to look over his left shoulder where Goliath presumably waits. His left arm is bent, so that his hand holding the slingshot just rests on the shoulder, with the slingshot resting on his shoulder and down his back. His right arm hangs motionless at his side. The young man is depicted in the nude, placing his youthful athletic body on visible display.

Michelangelo’s *David* has become one of the most iconic works of Western art. Along with his early *Pietà*, the *David* is often cited as the apex of Renaissance sculpture, as it celebrates the idealized human form, inspired by Classical antiquity.¹⁴ In part because of this, the image of the *David* is widely recognized and has been subjected to a number of kitschy reincarnations.

¹³ “Strangelove,” 2008, 20 Jan. 2008 <http://www.strangelove.co.za/page.php?a_id=19>.

¹⁴ Georgia Illetschko, *I, Michelangelo* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 64-67.

Consequently, even if a viewer is not aware of the *David*'s original significance or biblical origin, most likely the viewer will be familiar with the image through its perpetual appearance on a variety of merchandise, such as magnets, cigarette lighters, not to mention small plastic sculptures. Strangelove capitalizes on this recognizable image, altering only a few elements.

One crucial overarching difference between Michelangelo's original and Strangelove's re-creation is adaptation of the medium. While Michelangelo carved a figure out of marble, Strangelove has taken a live model, dressed him, posed him, and taken a photograph. The photograph's presence is much different than experiencing the original sculpture in the round. However, the majority of viewers are familiar with Michelangelo's *David* through the dissemination of its image—not through physically viewing the sculpture in person. Thus, Strangelove's re-creation effectively mirrors the contemporary familiarity of the Renaissance masterpiece—photographic image for photographic image.

Function of Re-creation

The first and most obvious change in Strangelove's re-creation is the race of *David*. For Strangelove as white South Africans, as for black South Africans, this shift is monumental in its implications, as it directly relates to the history and fall of apartheid. It is only with the end of the oppressive institutionalized system of racism that a black man can be shown publicly in the guise of a figure from a canonical Western work of art. But beyond a simple reference to the celebration of the "rainbow nation," Strangelove may also be using the contrast between the classicized *David* and their *African David* for their subversive capacity. By replacing the white body with a black body, the shift first points to racist preconceptions of ideal beauty. Historically, the black body has rarely been celebrated for its Classical beauty; rather, it has been the subject of exotic, highly-sexualized objectification. By choosing a male figure, Strangelove calls attention to assumptions of black male beauty, and sexuality in particular. The two, indeed,

cannot exist without the other, as notions of black male beauty are complicated and polluted by the unyielding associations with virile sexuality. Stereotypical assumptions of black male sexuality surround notions of aggression—primal urges and violent actions. These stereotypes are based on, and fueled by, racist preconceptions. Strangelove's *African David* recasts the Classical ideal, (beautiful and civilized) male figure as a black man. The sexual overtones of the original work and Strangelove's re-creation downplay any notion of sexual aggression. The apotheosis of the Renaissance tradition, inspired by the ideals and achievements of Classical antiquity, is now embodied by the black male body. Viewers of course will immediately recognize the image, even with its alterations, and will perhaps also realize the deeper critiques and shifts achieved by Strangelove's alterations.

Strangelove's use of a live model also prompts another glaring difference from the original: a hide loincloth has been fashioned to protect the male model's modesty, whereas Michelangelo's *David* is shown completely in the nude. Although blatant nudity was Michelangelo's original intention, this biblical figure has had his modesty protected by conservative critics throughout the centuries.¹⁵ An aptly placed fig leaf has sometimes censored this sculpture's offending parts, not unlike Strangelove's hide loincloth. The choice of a cowhide, as opposed to re-creating the fig leaf, is important, as it calls to mind local resonances. This element alludes to the importance of the cattle herder, an important role throughout much of the African continent. In southern Africa, resilient nguni cattle are a source of wealth and are depended upon for their milk, meat, and hide.¹⁶

¹⁵ For example, in 1545, a metal loincloth suggesting foliage was attached to the hips of David to preserve the biblical figure's modesty. See *David: Michelangelo* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2006), 10.

¹⁶ Marguerite Poland, *The Abundant Herds: A Celebration of the Nguni Cattle of the Zulu People* (Cape Town: Clarks, 2003).

The installation of the *Davids* is also strikingly different. Michelangelo’s original has been displayed in two different locations in Florence. Originally the *David* stood in the Piazza della Signoria, but since 1873, it has been housed in the Galleria dell’Accademia. In both installations, Michelangelo’s seventeen-foot statue has been placed on a pedestal more than six feet tall. This grandiose display has been simplified by Strangelove in their re-creation: their *African David* stands on a simple overturned black plastic milk crate. The milk crate is a common utilitarian object used in the townships of South Africa. The crates can be used as bins to carry goods, as stools to sit on at makeshift trading posts, among other functional purposes.¹⁷ According to Ziemek Pater of Strangelove, the use of the milk crate is a way “to tie in a contemporary element into our image of David.”¹⁸ He goes on to explain that the addition of the hide bracelet is a local symbol of manhood, given to every youth after he has completed his coming of age initiations and ceremony. Strangelove’s *David* is also devoid of the original’s curls. Shearing of hair, too, is a significant element in the coming of age rituals for men of various cultures in South Africa. Strangelove has effectively recast this icon of canonical Western art and civilization by altering and incorporating details that imbue this image with local and contemporary significances.

Original Impetus

Although *African David* fits into Strangelove’s conceptual framework, this particular work was commissioned for a specific occasion. The photograph, created in collaboration with photographer Hannelie Coetzee, was commissioned by the Michelangelo Towers in Johannesburg. The Michelangelo Towers includes a shopping center, gallery, and hotel complex. For its official opening in 2005, the center hired a curator to organize an exhibition for the

¹⁷ Ziemek Pater of Strangelove, “Strangelove,” Email to the author, 12 Feb. 2008.

¹⁸ Ziemek Pater of Strangelove, “Strangelove,” Email to the author, 12 Feb. 2008.

gallery space. An open call was circulated to artists for submissions of works that incorporate, recreate, or reinterpret Michelangelo's *David*. *African David* was proposed by Strangelove, and was subsequently accepted and placed on display as a life-size photographic image installed in the Michelangelo Towers' Gallery to celebrate the official opening of the complex. Even though Strangelove's *African David* critically appropriates this Western work, it is perhaps ironic that the impetus was explicitly commercial, like so many other *David* reincarnations.

Strangelove's *African David* appropriates the pose and subject matter of Michelangelo's famous *David*. However, Strangelove effectively altered the original so as to enact local significance. The design duo may also have had a subversive intent with their re-creation, which comments on stereotypes of black male beauty and sexuality in light of racist preconceptions. Most evidently, by changing the race of the *David*, Strangelove reinterprets a canonical work of Western art and responds to local dynamics.

CHAPTER 6

JOHANNES PHOKELA: *APOTHEOSIS*

South African artist Johannes Phokela often re-creates Dutch Old Master paintings, but he critically alters the gender or skin color of key characters. He also inserts contemporary allusions that disturb traditional religious, mythological, or aristocratic readings of his Baroque-inspired paintings. Through these small alterations, Phokela upsets national and cultural assumptions surrounding historical and contemporary art.¹

Johannes Phokela was born in Soweto, South Africa, in 1966. He studied in both South Africa and the UK, first at the Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA Art Centre) in Johannesburg and then attended several art schools in London, including St. Martin's College of Art, Camberwell College of Art, and the Royal College of Art, where he received his degree. Phokela currently lives and works in London. He has been included in numerous group exhibitions throughout the past two decades, including several major exhibitions in the past five years. In *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* of 2001, Phokela was included alongside artists such as Yinka Shonibare, Isaac Julien, Keith Piper, and Fred Wilson. In 2004, Phokela was featured in *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art* with Wim Botha, Jane Alexander, and Steven Cohen. In *Body of Evidence* of 2006, Phokela's work was displayed with works by El Anatsui, William Kentridge, and Godfried Donkor. Phokela's work has also been the subject of several solo shows, most recently in 2006 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery with his exhibition, *Translation*.

In *Apotheosis* of 2004, Phokela has loosely based his work on the style of Baroque master Peter Paul Rubens, which is characterized by voluptuous bodies, heightened emotion, dynamic

¹ Bruce Haines, "Changing The Title," in *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2001), 380.

compositions and dramatic color schemes (Figure 22). However, his alterations charge this seemingly generic Rubenesque painting with contemporary allusions. Phokela depicts a myriad of souls as if in a Last Judgment scene. Some are falling to their fate of an eternity in hell, while others are rescued by winged angels. The mass of painterly human forms falls away from the Christ-like figure, suspended at the top center of the composition, enclosed in a glass box. Rays of light radiate from this male figure, who raises his arms and surveys the scene before him. Phokela has inserted a Latin inscription along the bottom of the canvas, which reads: “Tyranidi Benevolae de Grata Clientela Triumphus.” This phrase can roughly be translated to: “Due to grateful patronage, there is a triumph for the benevolent tyrant.”²

Rubens Revisited

The style of Phokela’s paintings harkens back to the oeuvre of Peter Paul Rubens, a seventeenth-century Flemish painter now commonly referred to as one of the Old Masters. Rubens was a very successful artist who managed a large studio. Together with his studio assistants, Rubens is credited with producing hundreds of works. Notably, one of Rubens’s innovations was his preparatory oil sketches.³ Prior to Rubens, many artists completed preparatory ink sketches to clarify compositional elements. But Rubens’s use of oil allowed him to establish the tone and lighting of a work, as well as its composition. Phokela’s painterly style often resembles an oil sketch, and undoubtedly owes much to Rubens. Beyond the artist’s style, even the composition of Phokela’s *Apotheosis* resembles Rubens’s *The Last Judgment* (Figure 23). Another painting by Phokela that directly utilizes the theme of the Last Judgment is *Fall of the Damned* (1993). The work contains masses of writhing voluptuous human forms confused

² Translation by C. John Michet, graduate student in Classics at Washington University, St. Louis.

³ Peter C. Sutton, “Introduction,” in Peter C. Sutton and Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Drawn by the Brush: Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 17.

and tangled in a dramatic and chaotic composition (Figure 24). However, Phokela's title, *Apotheosis*, points to another direction.

"Apotheosis" comes from the Greek "to deify," and refers to the glorification of an individual to a divine condition. Although Rubens has several works that utilize the title "Apotheosis," one in particular closely relates to Phokela's work. Rubens's *Apotheosis of King James I* from the 1630s, which adorns the ceiling of the Banqueting House in Whitehall, London. However, Rubens made several oil studies in preparation for the final large work that are still extant. Phokela's *Apotheosis* shares a similar painterly quality with Rubens's studies, such as the version in the National Gallery in London (Figure 25).⁴ Rubens's work celebrates the hypothetical deification of England's King James I. Based on Phokela's use of "apotheosis" for his title, the assumption follows that the central Christ-like figure is becoming deified. Just who this central figure is remains vague, as is the reason for this figure's exaltation.

Painterly Qualities

Unlike many of the artists previously discussed, Phokela employs a traditional Western artistic medium: oil on canvas. Phokela's *Apotheosis* is arched at the top, a shape that resembles some altarpieces. For example, Rubens's *Assumption of the Virgin* altarpiece from Antwerp's Cathedral of Our Lady also has an arched top (Figure 26). The painting itself is also quite large, measuring 8'8" x 7'9" (270 x 241 cm). Both the size and shape of Phokela's work echo conventions of seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch altarpieces. But unlike finished monumental Baroque paintings, Phokela's *Apotheosis* resembles preparatory sketches. He utilizes an extremely reduced palette: white and limited shades of blue. Phokela also retains an obvious grid, which overlays the figures. Often, painters such as Rubens first made small

⁴ This version of *Apotheosis of King James I* from 1629-30 is on loan to the National Gallery in London from a private collection.

preparatory sketches for large commissioned works. These sketches were frequently overlaid with a grid and functioned as small-scale drawings of the final work. A corresponding larger grid was first applied to the canvas of the finished work. The artist or studio assistant then painted the larger work according to the grid, so that the final work retained the same composition and proportions as the original sketch. Bruce Haines asserts that Phokela has used grids “to flatten and neutralize the space and meanings contained within the framework of the painting. ... The seductiveness of the transcription [of Rubens’s originals] is, though, negated by a screen of white lines, traversing with a paneled effect across the surface, framing almost individually the forms of the descending naked bodies.”⁵ The grid does frame certain figures, such as the standing windswept woman at the bottom left of the composition. However, the grid also levels the entire composition behind its screen of lines. This technical device provides a conceptual distance for the viewer; one is able to step back from the narrative of the work and analyze underlying criticisms.

Phokela uses indications of both finished paintings and preparatory sketches in *Apotheosis*: the large-scale size and medium of a finished work, juxtaposed with the limited palette, sketch-like quality, and use of the grid of preparatory drawings. Phokela combines these sometimes contradictory elements to question the distinct notions of preparatory drawings and finished works. In Rubens’s time, sketches were a means to a final product, and not an end in themselves. In *Apotheosis*, Phokela toys with the notion of finished work that resembles the “preparatory conceptualizing” of an oil sketch.⁶ The disparity between finished works and preparatory sketches also extends to differences between original works as opposed to copies. Numerous

⁵ Haines, 381.

⁶ Nico van Hout, “The Oil Sketch as a Vehicle for Rubens’s Creativity,” in Peter C. Sutton and Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Drawn by the Brush: Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 74.

preparatory drawings may exist of one final work, and all are considered original works in their own right.

By appropriating a Rubenesque style, Phokela too plays with this notion of original works versus copies. Are his works to be considered original and autonomous, or can they exist only alongside an original Rubens? Phokela answers, "... What I initially set out to do was to defy all those myths about Africa, and also to emphasize that copying in itself had its own life, its own energy."⁷ Haines agrees, "The grid subverts the image and reaffirms both the painting's status as a reproduction and Phokela's position as an autonomous practitioner."⁸ The grid calls attention to this work's ambivalent status, perching precariously between notions of original versus copy, and a finished work versus a preparatory sketch. Phokela's *Apotheosis* challenges viewers to reassess conventional categories in the history of art.

Intertwined Histories

But Phokela makes reference to more than just Rubens's dynamic style and innovation of the oil sketch. Phokela also uses a Rubenesque painting style to refer to seventeenth-century Dutch history and economy. Although Rubens was Flemish, his proximity to seventeenth-century Dutch history and economy is useful for Phokela. The Counter-Reformation was in full force, and faced with the threat of Protestantism, the Catholic Church and many of its wealthy proponents financed the production of lavish religious art, in attempts to reinvigorate the Catholic faith. Rubens's work is the most famous example of this fervent religious belief manifesting in specific and plentiful Catholic art and imagery. Holland and Flanders in the seventeenth century were divided: the southern Catholic province remained under Spanish rule,

⁷ "Johannes Phokela," 121.

⁸ Haines, 381-82.

and the northern Protestant Dutch province fought for their independence from Spain and was eventually successful in 1648.

The newly independent Dutch Republic became an important naval power in the seventeenth century and colonized parts of Asia, America, and Africa. The Dutch and their early contact with what is today South Africa is of particular importance, as these intertwined histories inform much of Phokela's work. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company sent an expedition of ninety Calvinist settlers who arrived in what is today's Cape Town. By 1660, the population of the settlement rose to 187, including slaves. A school was opened to teach the children, and a fence was built around the settlement to separate themselves from the "natives." By 1717, the population had reached five thousand, half of which were Europeans and half were slaves. From the very beginning, relations with local Africans were antagonistic; slavery and segregation were customary. In Phokela's words, "The main point of my focus on the seventeenth century is because it's an interesting time in European history in terms of finance and commerce. It's the time when the first world bank was created, the first stock exchange, the first multinational companies; it was when the West was expanding—there was this rush to grab land, and the Dutch were the masters of it. ... So I'm looking at a particular period, and I'm trying to compare it to the world economic situation right now. There seem to be so many similarities in that."⁹

His paintings, historically Flemish in style, conflate Flemish and Dutch history to comment on South Africa's historical ties to Dutch colonization. He presses these intertwined histories to speak to continuing economic imbalances, which are products of this historical relationship. "Phokela links these re-interpretations of Dutch Golden Age painting...with the colonisation of the African continent. Whilst Phokela's work weaves a personal history into the canon of Dutch

⁹ "Johannes Phokela," 119.

and Flemish old master painting, his practice stands as an examination of the violent actions of the Dutch in South Africa, as much as an inquiry into the history of painting.”¹⁰

Contemporary References

Although Phokela’s *Apotheosis* resembles typical Last Judgment scenes painted throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods, his title points to another source of inspiration. Last Judgment scenes in general depict the day in the Christian tradition when Christ will pass judgment on all souls. The Last Judgment also marks the second coming of Christ, and he is often the focal point of such images. Christ saves those souls worthy of eternal life in heaven, who often reside on his right-hand side. Christ banishes to hell those unworthy of entrance into heaven. These souls, often shown on Christ’s left, are seen in torment and anguish, falling to the depths of hell for their eternal damnation. In Phokela’s *Apotheosis*, the confusion of bodies differs from Rubens’s more clearly segregated souls in his *Last Judgment*—saved on Christ’s right, damned to his left. Phokela has maintained a central male figure, but the identity of the character remains vague. Instead of Christ presiding over the frenzied scene, Phokela has depicted a male figure suspended in a glass box. Although rays of light radiate from the box, it does not overtly appear to be a figure of Christ. Instead, Phokela has identified the glass box as a contemporary allusion to the controversial American magician, David Blaine.

In 2003, Blaine fasted for forty-four days while suspended in a glass box over the River Thames in London (Figure 27). Although he had a constant supply of water, he apparently fasted the entire time. An estimated ten-thousand people came to see him emerge from his box,

¹⁰ “Johannes Phokela Re-Working Iconic Images,” *Absolute Arts*, 28 Jan. 2008
<<http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2002/05/15/29919.html>>.

according to the BBC.¹¹ Upon completion of his self-imposed challenge, Blaine suffered from malnutrition. Phokela has spoken of his amazement regarding the media response to Blaine's very public, self-inflicted starvation. Phokela says, "What came into my mind was that if those media ploys could be used to expose famine in Africa, it would be a great thing. I wanted to bring that plight into focus."¹² Phokela has utilized the recognizable aspect Blaine's media ploy of public starvation; by inserting the glass box, the artist attempts to realign his work with famine and starvation. But as media ploys fade in society's collective memory, so do their distinguishing features. Unfortunately, it is optimistic to expect viewers to recognize this fleeting allusion to contemporary popular culture.

Phokela inserts the image of the glass box into his Baroque-inspired painting for its contemporary popular resonance. This refiguration attempts to blend a historical artistic genre with a contemporary allusion and achieves only a disjointed effect. If successfully recognized, this alteration reframes the rest of this Baroque-inspired religious scene. Starvation victims replace the generic scene of struggling saved and damned souls. But the figure in the glass box remains ambiguous. Phokela has spoken of the possibility for various readings of the painting, which depend on who is inserted into the glass box. "That Blaine figure may land up being someone else, you know. It could be George Bush; it could be myself—as a god [laughs]."¹³ If it were George W. Bush, how would the painting's meaning change? Would it become a critique of the actions of the current president of the United States? Or would President Bush here be seen as a hero, owing to the generous contributions to the continent of Africa he has made

¹¹ "David Blaine Ends Glass Box Stunt," *BBC News*, 19 Oct. 2003, 29 Jan. 2008
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/19/newsid_3700000/3700652.stm>.

¹² "Johannes Phokela," 121.

¹³ "Johannes Phokela," 117.

possible, presumably helping to alleviate the daily struggle of thousands to meet basic needs?¹⁴

In Phokela's work, however, this Christ-like figure's identity remains indistinct.

In some ways, the ambiguous figure can be read in multiple ways, in light of many different situations. It can speak to society's tendency to idolize people, holding a person up in great esteem, even for trivial means. It might speak to the perceived lack of any authentic savior. Although transparent, the box serves to maintain a clear separation between realized goals and daily suffering. If the struggling masses below are understood as helpless victims, this glass box illustrates the unattainable solution. Indeed, the box may serve to delineate and draw contrasts between the "developed" and prosperous West, where basic needs are met, and the "developing" and struggling continent of Africa. In Phokela's words, "When you look at my work, there's no straightforward answer."¹⁵

Curious Inscription

The Latin inscription that adorns the bottom of this painting reads: "Tyrannidi Benevolae de Grata Clientela Triumphus" (Figure 22). This Latin phrase can roughly be translated to: "Due to grateful patronage, there is a triumph for the benevolent tyrant." The phrase does not translate well, and the contemporary meanings of the words used in translation do not relate well to the original Latin meaning. According to one translator, "...*clientela*, [or] patronage, refers to a relationship between the Roman elite and the lower classes...[where] an upper class Roman male will have a group of followers, whom he looks after, and in return they support him politically. Second, *triumphus* ... a 'triumph' is a large parade and celebration for a general upon his return

¹⁴ In addition to increasing US aid to sub-Saharan Africa from \$2.1 billion to \$5.4 billion between 2000 and 2005, President George W. Bush also founded the \$15 billion President's Emergency Plan for Aid Relief (Pepfar) in 2003, which supports healthcare and provides antiretroviral drugs to HIV-positive people. 12 of the 15 priority nations for Pepfar are located on the African continent. Accessed 4 April 2008. <<http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/node/8248>> and <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/15/georgebush.usa>>.

¹⁵ "Johannes Phokela," 119.

to Rome after a successful military campaign abroad ... [but] if someone did acquire a triumph, it was certainly not due to his patrons. Finally, the word tyrant is problematic, [as] there were not really tyrants in ancient Rome, at least in the Republic and Empire.”¹⁶

If the words are defined in a traditional Latin sense, the phrase seems to describe an implausible event, where a Roman elite male would enjoy a large celebration following a successful military campaign, owing to his improbable local support. However, if the phrase is loosely translated into modern English, then the phrase seems to describe an ironic occurrence, where the oxymoronic “benevolent tyrant” succeeds because of his indebted supporters. This peculiar phrase could describe difficult political situations involving tyrant-like leaders. For example, a leader gains too much power and proceeds to abuse his patrons’ support, all while maintaining a pleasing façade. Blame is passed on, and the leader remains “benevolent” in society’s mind. Whatever the interpretation, Phokela’s inscription seems to further confuse and complicate the overall reading of *Apotheosis*.

Phokela combines historical and contemporary elements in his *Apotheosis* to make comment upon contemporary economic imbalances, historical relationships, as well as the history of art. He appropriates a Rubenesque style, which allows him to comment upon disparities between original versus copy, finished work versus preparatory sketch, and the intertwined histories that began in the seventeenth century with Dutch colonization of today’s South Africa. He uses contemporary allusions in attempt to exploit media hype and diverts it to the anonymous starvation victims in Africa. Through *Apotheosis*, Phokela also references the perceived distance between Africa and the West, but the underlying and undeniable connection

¹⁶ Translation and explanation by C. John Michet.

of a global economy. Phokela's objectives for this work are both complex and critical but also lofty; he relies on specific references that may not be readily accessible to the average viewer, which ultimately detracts from a successful critical interpretation.

CHAPTER 7

HASSAN MUSA: *SAINT SEBASTIAN OF THE SUNFLOWER*

Since the early 1990s, Hassan Musa has appropriated works from the Western canon of art history for use in his own works of art. Musa has utilized popular Renaissance and Baroque interpretations of biblical themes, such as depictions of Saint Sebastian's martyrdom. He has also used recognizable images from the Western canon and popular icons, including images of Josephine Baker, Che Guevara, Vincent van Gogh, Osama bin Laden, and the Mona Lisa. However, Musa critically alters iconic Western imagery to comment on ideas about this history of Western art as it relates to African art and its "misconceived authenticity."¹

Hassan Musa was born in Sudan in 1951. He graduated from the College of Fine and Applied Art of Khartoum Polytechnic in 1976 and subsequently moved to France. He earned a doctorate in fine art and art history from the Université de Montpellier. Currently, Musa lives in Domessargues, in the south of France. He has taken part in several important exhibitions, such as *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (1995), *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora* (2003), and *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (2005). Musa works in several different media, including calligraphy-based ink on paper, image-based textile ink on printed fabric, and interactive performance art. In addition to his work as an artist, Musa simultaneously works as an art historian and critic. Because of this, art historian Salah M. Hassan has asserted that Musa's work, "...can only be understood in the parameters of such global and international discourses and practices ... as [Musa has] special access to discourses of postmodernism and to the languages and techniques of contemporary-art practice around the

¹ Salah M. Hassan, "Hassan Musa's ArtAfricanism: The Artist as Critic," in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, ed. Laurie Ann Farrell (New York: Museum for African Art, 2003), 116.

world.”² The artist strives to find the most effective way to deconstruct stereotypical understandings of contemporary African art. Hassan states, “Musa has actively engaged in the deconstruction of the widespread and persistent cultural mythologies and stereotypes of Africa, Africans, and African art that continue to plague the reception of modern African art.”³ As an African artist living and working in the West, Musa is deeply concerned with breaking down persisting fabricated perceptions of Africa. Musa’s work addresses the dynamic and problematic interactions between Africa and the West via the visual arts. As an artist with a foot in each place, Musa is particularly well placed to consider such relations.

Musa executes his oversized paintings on printed cloth. He begins with a printed design on a manufactured fabric; this design generally features prominently in his finished paintings. By using a printed fabric, Musa’s works make reference to decorative arts. Add this decorative quality to their large size, and the final products visually recall Renaissance and Baroque tapestries. After selecting a design, Musa uses textile ink to paint on the printed fabric. Often Musa retains much of the original design, which repeats throughout, sometimes appearing as an overlaid decorative design. His figures, then, are overlaid with a variety of elements from the original printed fabric, such as plants, flowers, fruits, vegetables, stripes, and even maps. Musa most often chooses a printed fabric that will add to the critical reading of the work. For example, in his *Saint Sebastian of the Sunflower*, Musa has chosen a print of sunflowers, to function as allusions to van Gogh and the arrows that injured the Christian martyr Saint Sebastian.

Saint Sebastian of the Sunflower (1999) is characteristic of Musa’s appropriation of recognizable references to the Western canon of art history put to critical means (Figure 28). In

² Hassan, “Hassan Musa’s ArtAfricanism: The Artist as Critic,” 115.

³ Hassan, “Hassan Musa’s ArtAfricanism: The Artist as Critic,” 115.

this work, Musa appropriated the typical portrayal of Saint Sebastian and combined it with a well-known self portrait by the late nineteenth-century artist Vincent van Gogh (Figure 29). Traditionally, Saint Sebastian is depicted as a youthful male tied to a tree and shot with arrows, which pierce his near naked body.⁴ The sixteenth-century depiction of Saint Sebastian by Il Sodoma is quite typical (Figure 30). Saint Sebastian is revered as an early Christian martyr, whose persecution and miraculous recovery inspired many sufferers. Because he made the ultimate sacrifice in support of Christianity, Saint Sebastian can also be viewed as a metaphor for the brutal and violent history of the Catholic Church. Although Saint Sebastian suffered as a victim on behalf of the Catholic faith, this violent episode also is reminiscent of the persecution the Catholic Church has inflicted upon others throughout the centuries. Imagery of Saint Sebastian can evoke admiration for his tremendous sacrifice, but this martyrdom of faith has the potential to induce complex reactions of Christian guilt and blame, wrapped up in centuries of austere rules and swift condemnation.

Characteristic of Musa's paintings, *Saint Sebastian of the Sunflowers* is painted on a pre-printed textile. The textile is patterned with scattered sunflowers, which are readily associated with van Gogh. This Post-Impressionist's paintings have become extremely popular since his death, particularly his still lifes with bouquets of sunflowers (Figure 31). They epitomize his now famous trademark style: thick brushstrokes of oil paint in bright, sometimes garish colors. But these sunflowers do more than just help identify the familiar self-portrait from the history of art: the stems of the sunflowers seem to pierce the body of this transfigured Saint Sebastian. Musa,

⁴ According to the Catholic tradition, Saint Sebastian was born in Narbonne, Gaul, and became a Roman soldier around 283. He converted numerous people, and when the Roman emperor began persecuting Christians, Sebastian was ordered to be executed. Sebastian was tied to a tree, shot with arrows and left for dead, but legend has it that he survived. He denounced the emperor for his cruelty towards Christians and was subsequently beaten to death around 288. "St. Sebastian," *Catholic Online*, 1 Feb. 2008 <http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=103>.

then, has made double use of each borrowed image: the recognizable visage of van Gogh and sunflowers directly recall the Post-Impressionist master, and the positioning of the sunflowers as if piercing the near nude male figure refers to typical Saint Sebastian imagery. Together, these images challenge ideas about Western high art traditions.

Function of Combined Imagery

Musa harnesses the associations most viewers bring to both van Gogh paintings and the image of Saint Sebastian to create new meanings, which reflect his own relationship to Western art. Van Gogh is often seen as a tragic victim in the history of art, as his works and believed artistic genius were not appreciated during his lifetime. Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo reveal his personal struggles, balancing his fervent passions and deep depressions.⁵ His life ended tragically in suicide, and today his paintings fetch some of the highest prices in the art market.⁶ Van Gogh can be seen, in a way, as a martyr of art: glorified after death for his artistic sufferings.⁷ By utilizing the self-portrait of this distressing figure, Musa attempts to evoke a compassionate, heartfelt response from viewers who are able to critically read the imagery.

Musa combines the imagery of van Gogh with the iconography of Saint Sebastian to create a work akin to montage. The recognizable self-portrait of van Gogh, with his red hair and beard, shows the artist opening his trench coat to reveal his nearly naked body. The sunflowers, particularly characteristic of his widely popular oeuvre, seem to drift across his vulnerable body. The stems of the sunflowers seem to pierce his body, on his chest, thigh, groin, shin, foot, and

⁵ For a detailed account of van Gogh's life and personal struggles, see Vincent van Gogh, *Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 2000).

⁶ For example, van Gogh's *Still Life: Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers* (1889) was sold for a record \$39.9 million US dollars in 1987.

⁷ Eliane Burnet, "The African of Service to the People of Zoos: Biennials of Contemporary Art," *Ethiopiquest: Revue Negro-Africaine de Litterature et de Philosophie* 73: np.

even eye. Van Gogh's iconography has been altered so as to invoke the arrows of Saint Sebastian's attempted martyrdom. The combination of visual referents to van Gogh now functions as if the artist is a Saint Sebastian-like martyr. A critic writes of this work, "Musa deals with [the Saint Sebastian] theme as an image that is critical of the hegemonic presence of Western culture."⁸ Musa uses recognizable elements of canonical Western art as a way to penetrate the visual language of the contemporary art world, which is still based on Euro-centric art traditions.⁹ As an African artist, he rejects the notion that one's work must visually reflect "Africa." Instead, he is concerned with appropriating and critically combining Western imagery to reveal its constructed nature, and its endless possibilities for interpretation.

"ArtAfricanism"

In his writings, performances, and works of art, Musa has coined the term "ArtAfricanism," which refers to the flawed ideological underpinnings of the (mis)representation of contemporary African art in the West. In Musa's own words, "I use the word 'ArtAfricanism' to designate a certain contemporary African art, fabricated and implemented by European and African political events within the framework of the economic and political rivalries that have moved Afro-European relations since the colonial era. This contemporary African art is the natural product of an artificial cultural dynamic, one created by the exhibitors of non-European art in Europe and America."¹⁰ Thus, Musa uses the term "ArtAfricanism" to refer to those works of art that rely on their immediately recognizable "African-ness." Musa believes this kind of work panders to the Western art market, providing images that fulfill and perpetuate Western

⁸ Burnet, np.

⁹ Joëlle Busca, "Art History Revisited: Hassan Musa," *Artexclu*, blog of Hassan Musa (4 July 2007). 1 Feb. 2008 <<http://artexclu.blogspot.com/2007/07/lhistoire-de-lart-revisite-hassan-musa.html>>.

¹⁰ Hassan, "Hassan Musa's ArtAfricanism: The Artist as Critic," 116.

misconceptions of Africa. It is a lucrative repackaging of Western stereotypes and mythologies of the “dark continent” in artistic form. Instead of using stereotypical “African” images, Musa ironically makes use of canonical works and images from the history of Western art. He turns these images back on their origins, forcing viewers to engage with the re-fashioned images.

Related Works

Musa has also created performance art pieces that hinge on spectators’ participation. Through their performative nature, these works attempt to emphasize the act of making art, rather than the autonomous product of art object. These “Graphic Ceremonies” often involve audience participation, riddles, proverbs, calligraphy, and drawings or paintings.¹¹ Musa combines many disparate media to create numerous contrasting relationships. He mixes the verbal function of calligraphy with the visual impact of images. Musa blends the participatory character of his interactive performances and the autonomous nature of his finished works of art. One such performance directly draws upon Saint Sebastian imagery. In his *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (1997), Musa created a triptych of three large printed-fabric panels painted with textile ink.¹² The side panels depict angels carving bows, appropriated from Mannerist artist Parmigianino’s *Cupid* of 1523-34. The central panel shows Saint Sebastian appropriated from Titian’s *Resurrection Altarpiece* (1522). Unbeknownst to the spectators, Musa attached condoms filled with red paint to the back of the central panel. Musa then gave spectators darts to throw at the painting, in effect reenacting Saint Sebastian’s attempted martyrdom. When the darts pierced the work, the paint-filled condoms soaked the fabric with red pigment. It appeared as though Saint Sebastian was bleeding from the wounds inflicted by the darts. The performance and

¹¹ Hassan, “Hassan Musa’s ArtAfricanism: The Artist as Critic,” 119.

¹² No image available.

interactive nature of this piece brought the saint's martyrdom to life and symbolically reminded viewers and participants of the violence associated with the history of religions. Participants do not know whether or not they will hit the hidden targets, but they are all guilty of perpetuating the violence. Spectators, too, are guilty by implication; they observe this poignant artistic act and are implicated in the outcome.

Musa's use of bleeding condoms, too, resonates with HIV/AIDS awareness. Although perhaps not his explicit intention with the work, the image of broken condoms leaking red pigment is highly charged. When related to the image of Saint Sebastian, the connection becomes even stronger. Saint Sebastian is often depicted as a scantily-clad male youth with an androgynous sort of beauty. His attempted martyrdom by arrows was a favorite depiction of many Renaissance and Baroque artists, who reveled in the heart-wrenching and gruesome image of a beautiful youth cut down in his prime. A contemporary Saint Sebastian may indeed be read as a symbol for the HIV/AIDS epidemic: youths, and stereotypically gay men in particular, are at an elevated risk if they practice unsafe sexual relations. The condom has become a preventative antidote to the incurable virus, and the image of broken, bleeding condoms can only conjure thoughts of the global struggle against HIV/AIDS.

Hassan Musa has attempted to break down stereotypical notions of African art. He has appropriated elements of canonical Western works and critically combined them to comment upon the hegemonic presence of Western culture.¹³ His *Saint Sebastian of the Sunflowers* blends the iconography of Saint Sebastian with references to van Gogh, exposing the "artistic martyrdom" of the now respected and revered van Gogh. His performance work, *Martyrdom of*

¹³ Burnet, np.

Saint Sebastian turns on audience participation, to reenact the youth's attempted martyrdom with arrows. The martyr actually bleeds red pigment, and responsibility is placed on participants and observers. Musa effectively appropriates Western imagery to comment upon its dominating presence, and by altering the images, he utilizes their endless possible implications.

CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION

In order to comment upon historical and contemporary global relations, several contemporary African artists have appropriated elements from canonical Western art for their own critical use. They often utilize these elements or works of art first for their recognizable qualities: a familiar image has the ability to capture the viewer's attention. However, their apt appropriation of canonical art historical imagery altered in specific ways has the ability to shed light on the complex relationships between Africa and the West.

Some artists parody scenes from canonical works of art, such as Yinka Shonibare in his installation works. Shonibare's adaptations of Fragonard's Rococo paintings both revel in conspicuous consumption and critique it, playfully pointing to historic and continuing global economic imbalances. He combines stereotypical references to the West, through aristocratic period costumes, and to Africa, by way of the conceptually complex wax-print fabrics, to shed light on their interdependency.

Like Shonibare, Strangelove re-creates a familiar canonical work of art: their *Africa David* mimics Michelangelo's original sculpture in pose and subject matter. However, Strangelove's small alterations force viewers to reconsider this work, both globally and locally in a South African context. By changing the race of the *David* and altering such details as his hairstyle, clothing, and platform, Strangelove's image retains the visual power of the original but takes on contemporary significance.

Similar to Strangelove, fellow South African Wim Botha appropriates subject matter from Michelangelo; his *Mieliepap Pietà* exactly replicates a mirror-image of the Renaissance sculpture. Botha's choice of medium, however, imbues this "conceptual de-creation" with local resonances. This powerful image of mourning also has the ability to transcend its original subject

matter and assume a more universal notion of injustice, particularly when considered in light of the famous photograph of Hector Pieterse, a victim of apartheid-era police violence. Botha effectively transforms the meaning of this potent image, harnessing its power for his own means.

Other artists combine disparate imagery to create new works of art. Hassan Musa utilizes imagery directly borrowed from canonical art history, such as allusions to Saint Sebastian and van Gogh in his *Saint Sebastian of the Sunflowers*. Musa's seamless joining of these images allows viewers to read their implications in dialogue, conflating notions of perceived martyrdom: one religious, the other artistic. Though Musa attempts to break down stereotypical notions of African art through the use of Western canonical imagery, his criticisms of the hegemonic presence of Western culture are sometimes lost on audiences. Johannes Phokela, on the other hand, combines a recognizable historical style with references to popular culture. His sketchy Rubenesque manner of painting raises questions concerning authenticity and the historical connection of colonialism, but his reliance on a fleeting media stunt in his *Apotheosis* can limit the viewer's ability to successfully decipher his pastiche.

The works I have interrogated use different means of appropriation, but all rely on subject matter from the art historical canon. Through close reading of their works, these contemporary African artists intend critiques of particular histories, canonical Western art, and historical and contemporary understandings of global relations. Contemporary African artists' appropriations of the Western canon enact playful and biting criticisms regarding the conceptual exchange taking place between Africa and the West.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

MacKenzie Moon was born and raised in Marshall, Minnesota. After graduating from Marshall High School in 2002, she earned her Bachelor of Arts from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She double-majored in art history and history, with a focus on the continent of Africa. Ms. Moon studied under Professor Leonardo Lasansky and contributed to the realization of two exhibitions of African art during her tenure at her alma mater. After studying abroad at the School for Oriental and African Studies, University of London, she graduated *magna cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa in 2006. She pursued her Master of Arts in art history at the University of Florida, Gainesville, and graduated in May 2008. At UF, Ms. Moon focused on Contemporary African art and studied under Dr. Victoria L. Rovine, while greatly benefiting from the scholarship of Drs. Robin Poynor, Alexander Alberro, Eric Segal, Melissa Hyde, Shepherd Steiner, and Susan Cooksey. Following graduation, Ms. Moon will continue her studies at the University of Florida at the PhD level.