Black Magic

"Every era has to reinvent the project of 'spirituality' for itself...In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is 'art.'" —Susan Sontag, The Aesthetics of Silence

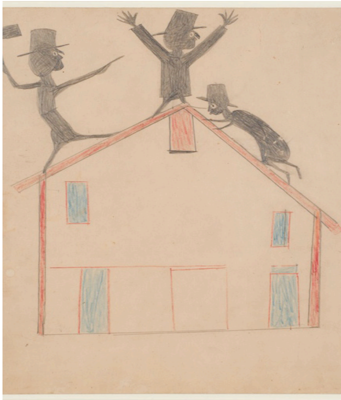
"We must see the world in terms of our own realities." —Larry Neal, Any Day Now: Black Art And Black Liberation

They are talismans. Objects born out of the African diaspora, looking forward as they look back, luminescent on the edge of darkness. The pictures, paintings, sculptures have purpose, stretching out toward something new as they contemplate our real political, spiritual and cultural liberation. It is art that struggles with cultural representation and our raw political realities to signify something of change, something of radical beauty, something of the salt of the earth and the indecent suffering and glimmering hope of the unimaginable. Beautiful as the talismans are, do you see their thundering truth? What does it make plain about us? About how history coalesces around this current moment? About resistance? About complicity? About blackness and whiteness and those whose lives are always bumping up against those rigid lines of color and expectation where self begins and has often ended?

The British-Nigerian artist, Yinka Shonibare MBE, has gathered them together in an exhibition, "Talisman in the Age of Difference" at Stephen Friedman Gallery. Shonibare, a contemporary shaman, "didn't want to talk about diaspora without actually talking about the intangible power of the objects that have recorded its history, imaged its people and protested the injustices that have fallen upon its lands." The closest thing he could think of that carries the power of the art he has curated 'is the talisman.' "I wanted to celebrate an artists' power to create magical things as a form of resistance," he says. "I felt that [with these objects] I wanted to look at the spiritual resonance of our subjects and connect that to politics."

Over the last several decades, Shonibare has created his own monumental talismans wrapped in his trademark material: the brightly colored 'African' batik fabric. In works like Double Dutch (1994), a series of small square canvases covered in the vibrant cotton cloth set against a hot pink backdrop, we are confronted with the way his overture of headless sculptures, colonial installations, films and portraits possess a strange and slippery puissance that encompasses the grand stories and absurdities of colonialism, race and inequality. The seminal work's title, "Double Dutch" is a play on words that alludes to the colloquial use

Mickalene Thomas
Jet Blue #1, 2018
Mixed media collage on archival board
138.4 x 111cm (54 1/1 x 43 3/4in)
Framed: 154.3 x 130.8cm
(60 3/4 x 51 1/2in)



Bill Traylor
Untitled (Figures on House), c. 1939-1942
Graphite and coloured pencil on cardboard
34.3 x 26.7cm
(13 1/2 x 10 1/2in)

Zanele Muholi
Yaya Mavundla, Parktown, Johannesburg, 2014
Silver gelatin print
76.5 x 51cm (30 1/8 x 20 1/8in)
Framed: 89 x 63cm
(35 x 24 7/8in)

of the term and the origins of the textiles, commonly known as Dutch wax fabric, that was inspired by Indonesian design and mass-produced by the Dutch and eventually sold to the colonies in West Africa. Since the 1960s, it has been worn as a sign of independence and solidarity. Shonibare who buys the textiles in Brixton Market is drawn to the fact that "the fabrics are not really authentically African the way people think." It's the "fallacy of that signification" he likes. "It's the way I view culture—it's an artificial construct."

What Shonibare has gathered to bring this moment in culture into focus is art that carries a "talismanic dimension" to it. These talismans with their cryptic symbolism sit in exact harmony with the ways in which we have continued to reckon with our histories to present new politics of identity as a way to encourage and "celebrate diversity." The exhibition is, what Shonibare calls, "an expression of Black Lives Matter" and contemporary progressive movements in the way they also represent a challenge "to all the people who want to go back to some kind of conservative right- wing agenda."

Beauford Delaney's portrait Man in African Dress (1972) is a lush and celebratory image of heritage; the British filmmaker Isaac Julien's, After George Platt Lynes, Nudes 1942 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series) (1989-2017) is an expression of black gay love; and the African-American sculptor, Melvin Edward's welded bits of steel to make works such as Libation (1992) into what he calls, "lynch fragments" that evoke the African-American story of struggle and freedom like Untitled (Figures on House) (c. 1939-1942), Bill Traylor, the African-American artist born into slavery, flat, coded and alluring drawings of rural life in Alabama.

Beauty is considered too. The African-American artist Deborah Robert's Silent Protest (2018), a collage of a young black girl that stakes claim to her innocence and visibility. It is among other works Shonibare has curated in the exhibition like Mickalene Thomas's Jet Blue #1 (2018), a nude black femme figure that question how black women and girls have been left out of common constructions of beauty. The South African visual activist Zanele Muholi's Yaya Mavundla, Parktown, Johannesburg (2014), is a glamorous black-and-white portrait of a black trans woman, captured as emblem of beauty expanded to be more brave and radically inclusive.

Like traditional talismans, Shonibare has included works that summon gods and goddesses. But here, the Cameroonian-Nigerian photographer, Samuel Fosso invoke modern idols of black self-determination. In his 2008 African Spirits series of highly stylized self-portraits, the artist dresses up in the iconic guises of important black cultural and political leaders such as Angela Davis, Seydou Keïta and Patrice Lumumba. The British artist Irvin Pascal's Self-portrait as Jean Michel Basquiat (2017-18), fashioned from torrefied wood and his own hair, among other materials, is totemic in the way it is a reminder of the influence of the pioneering black artist practice.

On display also are a few curious bronze sculptures such as CFC76311561 (2002) from the Chapman Family Collection created by the British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman. The work appear at first glance like rare African fetish object—for sure you have seen something like it before!—yet as you linger on the features you realize it is no mask at all but a famous logo: Ronald McDonald holding a box of fries and a soda. The McDonald's logo as fetish object casts doubt on the others from the collection such as, CFC72540310, (2002), a bronze in the mold of a traditional African mask but in fact is not. The title like all the works in the

John Outterbridge
Dancer's Charm, 2009
Mixed media
61 x 19 x 9cm
(24 x 7 1/2 x 3 1/2in)

Jake & Dinos Chapman
CFC76311561, 2002
Bronze
92 x 58 x 49cm

Chapman collection is one of several phone numbers that would route you to one of the fast food franchises in London.

The trickery of the Chapman bronzes also get at the reductive notion of "African art" that is said to be imbued with an authentic black aesthetic. In this way, the exhibition wrestles with the essentializing of blackness into expected forms of social realism and figurative representation. There are works like John Outterbridge's Dancer's Charm (2009) that poetically uses assemblage to summon not just the appearance of physical identity but the spiritual through abstraction, complicating our images and perceptions of blackness. Yet, the Chapman Family Collection like Derrick Adams' Figures in the Urban Landscape 13 (2018), of a black male figure that appear both hidden and visible at once, even casts doubts on a true understanding of the figurative representations of blackness which have dominated the 20th century movements in black art and the renewed vigor surrounding contemporary black portraiture.

"Now, what are those works doing? Are they celebrating African art? Are they a critique of globalization?," asks Shonibare who included the Chapman objects in the exhibition to allow us to reach our own conclusions. The objects exist with a high degree of "ethical ambivalence," that is informed by the history of African masks and imagery and their influence on modern art. Because we think we have seen them before, the Chapman objects as inauthentic as they are, still exude a kind of power. That power is only diminished when you realize the clown make up on Ronald McDonald's face. Upon that realization, the fantasy of what an African object is and what it brings goes away. We must pay closer attention to what we see and celebrate. We've been praising false idols all along.

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