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Yinka Shonibare MBE: "Magic Ladders" at The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia

by Paul Laster

Yinka Shonibare and Judith F. Dolkart, Barnes chief curator



January 25, 2014 @ the Barnes Collection

The first commission at the Barnes Foundation since Henri Matisse created a mural for the collection in the 1930s, the sculpture *Magic Ladders* reflects Yinka Shonibare's belief, shared with museum founder Albert C. Barnes, in the importance of education, enlightenment, opportunity and social mobility for all races and classes. The show of the same name features the commissioned work, which depicts three children ascending ladders whose rungs are formed by books from Barnes's library, and 16 additional paintings, sculptures, photographs and installations. The exhibition (through Apr. 21) puts

Shonibare's work in dialogue with Barnes's collection of modern masterpieces, eccentric ironwork and African artifacts.

"When I first started reading about Barnes, I discovered that he was very keen on opportunity for all, that he was very keen on education," Shonibare told *A.i.A.* at the

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opening. "The books on the ladders show the aspirational potential of children, that they can actually transform themselves through knowledge."

Highlights of the show include the installation *Victorian Philanthropist Parlour*, a mock museum period room for an aristocrat of African descent; and *Scramble for Africa*, an installation of 14 headless mannequins representing European diplomats in African garb seated at a table inscribed with a map of Africa, which they are carving up.

"In thinking about our contemporary program, we want to work with artists that can stand up to the challenge of one of the greatest collections in the world, and we had no doubts that Shonibare could do it," Barnes chief curator Judith F. Dolkart told *A.i.A.* "We were interested in the point of correspondence between Shonibare's work and the mission of the Barnes, which has resonance in the exhibition, as well as a certain anti-establishment streak, which is echoed here."

Photos by Paul Laster.



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