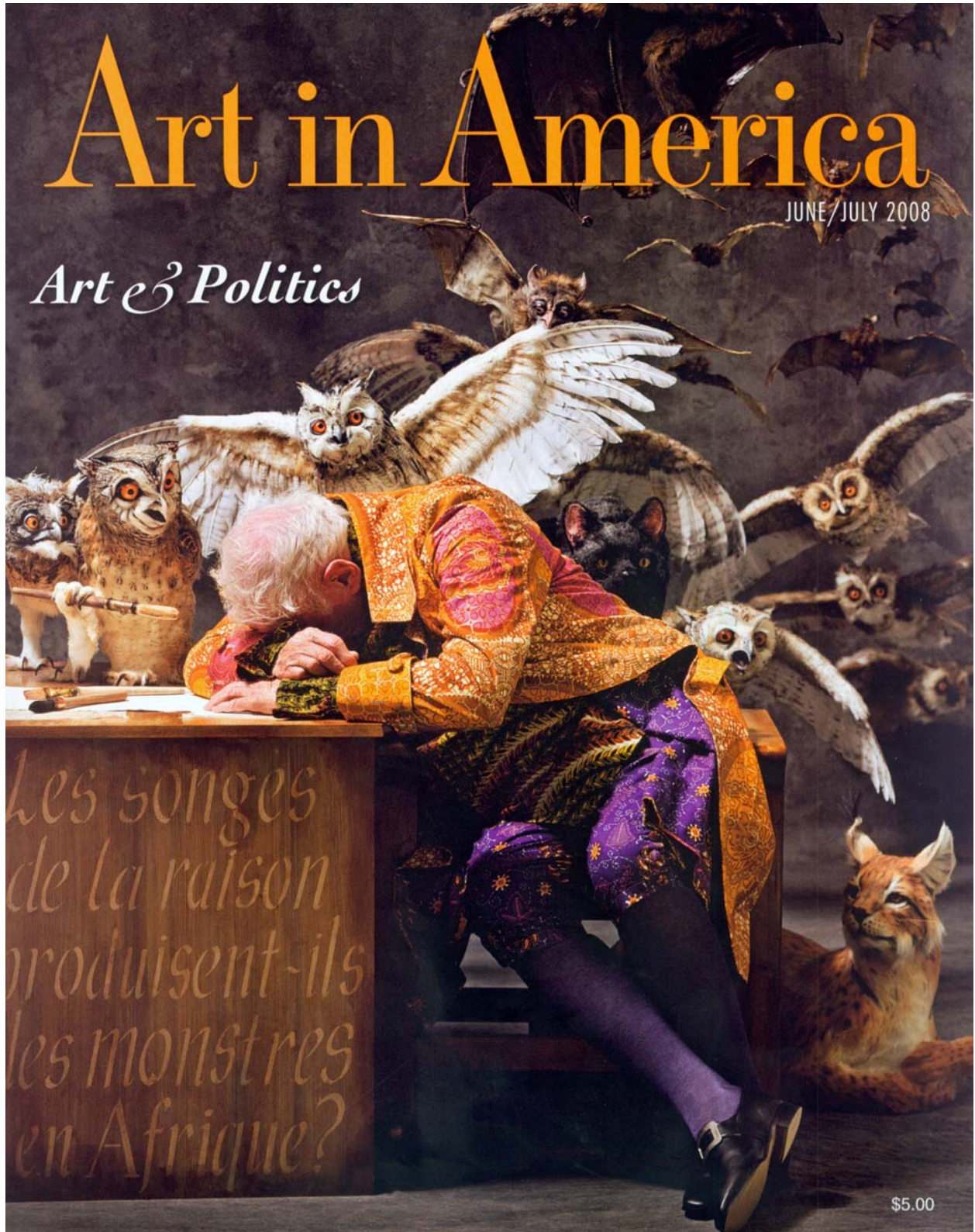


JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Hirsch, Faye, "Yinka Shonibare at James Cohan," *Art in America*, June 2008: cover, 189.



Yinka Shonibare at James Cohan

According to Yinka Shonibare MBE (who always uses his honorific, relishing the irony of its placement after his patently un-English name), "Prospero's Monsters," the title of his recent exhibition, refers to the colonialist implications of the imprisonment of Caliban in *The Tempest*. Neither Caliban nor Prospero made an appearance in the show, but Shonibare, who has spent his life straddling worlds (he was raised in Nigeria and England and is a fixture in the global art scene), continues cleverly to upend the tropes of Western art and history through quotation and parody. Monsters like Caliban might be grotesque hybrids, but as Shonibare has repeatedly demonstrated, hybridity is a condition of expressive possibility.

The exhibition had three parts. In a room to the side of the entrance, in a glass display case, was a large three-dimensional model of a frigate foundering at sea and a C-print mounted on aluminum of the same model photographed with a stormy backdrop and dramatic lighting. A plaque labeled the ship *La Méduse*, named for the ill-fated vessel that was the subject of Géricault's 1819 succès de scandale. Shonibare's frigate struggles in painted-foam break-

ers, its snapped lines and tattered sails flailing. The sails are made from the artist's signature batik fabrics—wax-printed textiles originally manufactured by the Dutch for an Indonesian market, but which have come to be commonly associated with Africa.

More of the printed fabrics were used in the natty 18th-century costumes adorning five life-size mannequins in the main gallery, based on Enlightenment philosophers and scientists (Kant, Lavoisier, Adam Smith, Jean le Rond d'Alembert and Gabrielle Emilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, Marquise de Châtelet, the only female figure), shown with various period props and implements. As usual (and I have to confess the formula is beginning to make me fidgety), Shonibare makes them headless, a reference here to the Revolution's guillotine and the Enlightenment's dark fallout. Moreover, Lavoisier is seated in a wheelchair at his desk and d'Alembert is standing on a crutch at his podium, alluding to Shonibare's own disability from an earlier illness, but doubling as a sign of reason's vulnerabilities. Some of the acephalics are writing with quill pens; Smith reaches toward archaic volumes of *The Wealth of Nations* in a nearby bookcase. Art historians had to love the depiction of Lavoisier, who turns his torso as if looking upward, in the pose of Jacques-Louis David's famous portrait of the scientist and his wife at the Metropolitan Museum (the painting's laboratory props—the glass beaker and bubble—were there as well).

More art history was at hand in the back room, which presented



Yinka Shonibare: *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America)*, 2008, C-print on aluminum, 72 by 49½ inches; at James Cohan.

five large, handsome C-prints mounted on aluminum showing life-size tableaux vivants of Goya's famous *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, from his "Los Caprichos" etchings, published in 1799. Here, each of the photographs represents a different continent. The title Goya wrote on the side of the sleeping man's desk is changed to a question, which for some reason Shonibare asks in French (perhaps to extend the overall jumble of identities): "Do the Dreams of Reason Produce Monsters in Australia?", ". . . in America?", ". . . in Africa?," etc. The sleeper varies in race and age, while the props—the owls and the seated great cat—remain the same. Like the rest of the exhibition, the photos were wonderfully crafted and light in spirit, even humorous (the critters look like high-end Steiff toys), leavening a well-worn sermon preached to the converted.

—Faye Hirsch