

“RESISTING AFRICA:” NOTES ON AN EXHIBITION

Victoria Bell



Figure 1. *Resisting Africa* (2011), exhibition view. Photograph by Craig McNab.

The exhibition “Resisting Africa” was presented at the Temple Gallery, Dunedin, from 12 August to 2 September 2011 and was the conclusion of my Master of Fine Arts degree undertaken at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic – Te Kura Matatini ki Otago, New Zealand. Founded on a critical reflection of my youthful travels as a tourist in Morocco and Kenya, the show explored my inherent consumption of Western tropes of Africa as an ‘exotic’ or ‘savage’ locale. Through research into the critical frameworks and histories bound within the discourse of postcolonialism, I was able to ‘unpack’ my discrete tourist experiences and reflect on my travel with new insight. The following essay introduces aspects of this research in relation to the final artworks produced for this show.

I have and have not been to Africa.

Africa: not a single imagined country but many nations.

As a tourist I have been to places in Africa, within a bubble of my own – unrecognised fantasies and cultural constructions. I have travelled through landscapes, savannahs, across lakes, rivers and the Indian ocean, entered cities, temples, markets and slums ... always contained within a vehicle, a vessel, a room, a space, by my guide, by my language, by my skin ... kept in close proximity to 'Africa,' but always at a distance.

I have not been to Africa.

The viewer enters a vignette of animal/furniture sculptures made from rich upholstery velvets and antiques. These works re-order the accepted shift from animal to object through 'wrong' configurations of furniture and covering, disrupting a viewer's easy consumption of the 'exotic.' Here the drawing room and safari collide: evoking the implicit histories and constructions, desires for the 'exotic' and 'other' avoid (death, wealth, poverty, fantasy, transference ...).

These strange animal 'trophies' refer to my safari journey in Kenya. The idea of the safari tour – looking at wild animals in a constructed natural setting, from a vehicle which can only stop in 'safe' zones – is shifted by relocating animal motifs to a domestic interior setting. This reshuffle of contemporary African safari and Victorian colonial signs into an 'off' tableau refers to Western tropes of Africa which play out in cinematic and literary tales and which informed my own desire to travel to Africa – in particular, *Out of Africa*, directed by Sydney Pollack, and *The Sheltering Sky*, directed by Bernardo Bertolucci.

Debbie Lisle, in *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, has said that "[t]he idea that 'everybody moves freely' in a globalised world is a fallacy: only those who can afford to move, or those who are willing to take the risks associated with migration, are able to cross established geopolitical borders with ease."¹ Reflecting on my previously naive approach to travel and tourism, this statement resonated with my personal experiences. Not everybody can move freely. Furthermore, in terms of the tourist experience, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, make a case that "contemporary tourism, it can be argued, is in many ways the modern extension of ... possession by exploration. The tourist enters the territory of the 'other' in search of an exotic experience."²

The accretions of 'exotic' Africa include the artefacts and animals which circulate in Western culture's primitive vernacular. During the realm of colonial conquest, collectors in the guise of explorer, colonial agent and ethnographer gathered objects officially and unofficially, which were then relocated to Europe. Most assuredly, the drive for scientific discovery, described as the 'anti-conquest' by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, provided the momentum for the excessive collection of artefacts, flora and fauna samples and the intensive accumulation of exotic animals: animals which were hunted and killed so as to be depicted as life-like taxidermy objects in great museums. The push and pull of trade in both directions – to Africa, and the consequential relocation of animal 'trophies' and other collectables to Europe – produced surreal fusions of objects in colonial homes, then and still now. The visual language of this 'exotic' collecting remains a trope of 'exotic style' in contemporary interior design.

In particular, British campaign furniture enabled the values and aesthetics of the Victorian epoch to traverse far beyond the geographic borders of Great Britain. This furniture, made portable by the ingenuity of Thomas Sheraton and Thomas Chippendale et al, which could be transported easily without the need for nails or tools, and assembled in "some corner of another foreign field that was forever elegantly furnished England"³, also furnished safari expeditions of the past and lingers in the aesthetics of contemporary lodgings in Africa and the West.

The portability of this furniture, while highly functional, was dependent on indigenous porters to provide the manpower to mobilise these English accommodations. As the Victorian travel writer Francis Galton notes, "The luxuries and elegances practicable in tent-life, are only limited by the means of transport ..."⁴ Campaign furniture may stand then as a sign for the hierarchies of power active in the colonial age.

The circulation of campaign furniture by military expeditions and, later, settlers to the colonies also contributed to the transportation of British hierarchies of class and rank to the 'new world.' Class structures and manners were maintained abroad in 'uncivilised' terrains, despite the practicalities required of a non-European setting, by the use of furniture items to perform cultural etiquette. Campaign furniture informed my research in a series of ways. As props, part of the 'exotic' period elements in films such as *Out of Africa*, this furniture forms part of the visual vocabulary of romanticised 'Africa.' In reality, the major colonising activity of the past occurred under the reign of Queen Victoria and the furniture of this period becomes a sign of those times: a reference to Victorian England.

In considering Victorian England it is important to mention the artist Yinka Shonibare, whose art practice critiques colonialism with humour and beauty. He recognises the continuing presence and impact on contemporary life of Victorian conventions and inventions which were products of the British encounter with Africa, such as the banking system, which originated firstly in relation to the slave trade.⁵ Nigerian-born and raised in a prosperous Yoruba family based in Lagos, Shonibare was surprised when he entered an élite English boarding school, at age 16, to find that "there was this notion that if you were black you were somehow disadvantaged." In an interview with Anthony Downey, published in the monograph *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, he discusses further his interests in Victoriana and the prominence of this reference point in his work:

Let me ... [note] that I am an African speaking English to you. The reason for that is because of the colonial period ... in the 1980's the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher started to talk about Victorian values ... I thought it would be ironic to play with ... that notion of Victorian 'values.' There was a way of subverting that idea of the historical authority of the Victorian period by appropriating it or being complicit with it ... [In] *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* ... the philanthropist wants to help the less fortunate; however, in this opulent environment of the parlour, where he has decorated his walls with images of black footballers, there will always be a relationship of patronage; or, if you like, a relationship between 'haves,' the colonial philanthropist, and the so-called 'have-nots,' the poor colonials. Philanthropy is more about dominance in the colonial context than it is about altruism; it is more of a condescending idea where the power relationship is never equal.⁶

Thematically, a link between "Resisting Africa" and the established and extensive practice of Shonibare is possible. Critically though, he is African and British, which I am not, and has an inherently different and deeper understanding of this territory. However, there remains a sensibility in his work which I am drawn to and influenced by. His repeated use of textiles as a key medium has made his practice visible in textile forums⁷ as well as visual arts contexts. Shonibare's use of Dutch wax textiles is complex, as these materials are both a product of and sign for the muddy, transcontinental history of colonialism. These highly coloured fabrics, symbolic of African identity, represent the ironies of cultural authenticity, as their origins are far more complex. As Rachel Kent, a contributor to *Yinka Shonibare MBE* and curator of the exhibition of the same name notes, these fabrics are "inspired by Indonesian batiks, manufactured in the Netherlands and Manchester, and marketed in the nineteenth century to West African buyers ... [They have] become a signifier of authentic African identity ... [yet] this might seem ironic, in light of their European colonial origins."⁸ With insouciance and flair Shonibare presents politically charged subject matter beautifully and whimsically, seducing viewers into an engagement with his artworks by his mastery of the visual languages of pattern, colour and form, before they perhaps realise the underlying critiques present in his subject matter.

Coupled with the furniture elements in "Resisting Africa" are the African animals which are entwined within the works. I am concerned with the use of animals as curios and signs of status which allude to and re-inscribe imperial activity. From the nineteenth century onwards the display of African animal trophies has been acceptable in

different quarters, conveying the eminence of an owner's hunting ability, wealth or taste. Western culture has readily consumed African animals as objects within the museum and as elements of interior decorating. It remains for many acceptable that an elephant's foot be made into an umbrella stand or stool,⁹ or a zebra skin be made into a fine rug.

In 1991 Carol J Adams wrote *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, which explored the relationship between patriarchal values and meat-eating. Adams introduced the structure of the 'absent referent,' a linguistic shift which occurs when we talk about meat and animals; for example, we eat pork but this meat comes from an animal we call a pig. By shifting language terms from subject to object, we exclude the death required of the animal in order for us to consume it. In this way we maintain a separation between 'meat' and the idea that it was once a living animal. Adams proposes that the use of the absent referent not only oppresses animals, but also women and other non-dominant humans. She states that women and animals are linked as absent referents in the texts of a patriarchal society: "Terms relating to parts of a woman's body and cuts of meat are often used interchangeably ... The link is also seen in everyday language: If animals are the absent referent in the phrase 'the butchering of women,' then women are the absent referent in the phrase, 'the rape of animals.'"¹⁰

Adams' theory of the absent referent offers a way of understanding why we accept animals as objects. When we re-term a Zebra's skin as a rug, the horror of its death is abstracted, remaining separate from our considerations of 'good' design in decorating our homes.

Each artwork in "Resisting Africa" also expresses particular qualities. *Heart of Darkness* sprawls across the gallery floor like a pool of blood. The deep red and taupe work plays on ideas about death, luxury and colonisation. Zebra skin rugs are a common interior decorating motif, seen in homes displayed in many interior design magazines. I believe there is something particularly horrific about the casual arrangement of chairs over the heads of these 'rugs' or in the invitation to sit on a zebra skin draped over a couch. For the reader to imagine, or home owner to actually do this, means that the abstraction of the animal's death is so convincing that it is no longer perceived as a once living entity. In these Western interiors, the animal's hide is used decoratively, to signify affluence and a taste for the 'exotic.'

In Peter Beard's photo book, *The End of the Game*, the excesses of colonialism are hauntingly documented. Beard's makeshift safari to the edge of Somalia in 1960 greatly impacted his life and photography. He critically perceived the costs of colonialism and began to record the consequences of colonial rule by documenting the diminishing wildlife and traumatised lands of Africa. He stated in 1965: "It is too late to undo what has been done. The laws of inevitability which have ruled Africa for millions of years must now be accepted by Africa's conquerors. To understand this is to begin to realize that we have conquered nothing at all."¹¹

Out of Africa is made from a nineteenth-century chaise longue, approximately dated to 1850, which was stripped to its wooden frame, restored, and then re-upholstered in blue velvet to match the lioness which reclines upon it. The two objects are staged as one piece. By retaining the form of the lioness's body, Adams' notion of the 'absent referent' is referenced. Rather than a 'skin' draped across the chaise, her body remains whole. Therefore, positioned, even camouflaged on the chaise longue, the lioness stands in judgement on the West's ready consumption of African animals as decorative objects.

This piece also refers to Edouard Manet's *Olympia* of 1863, a work which continues to be re-staged and critiqued in contemporary art. Artists responding to this painting have critiqued ideas about male objectification of the female body in terms of desire and possession, and have explored subjectivities of female and non-white bodies. In *Portrait (Futago)* of 1988, Yasunasa Morimura highlights the dimension of race in his reworking of Manet's painting:



Figure 2. *Out of Africa* (2011) (detail), mixed media, 105cm x 180cm x 110cm. Photograph by Craig McNab.



Figure 3. *Heart of Darkness* (2011) (detail), mixed media, 20cm x 140cm x 180cm. Photograph by Craig McNab.



Figure 4. *I Dreamed of Africa* (2011), mixed media, 90cm x 52cm x 66cm (each). Photograph by Craig McNab.

By inserting a non-European body into *both* of *Olympia's* figures, black and white, the gesture outlined another power ratio at work in Manet's *Olympia*, one that had been rather mysteriously elided: male over female, bourgeois over working class, yes – but also white vision and white art over non-white vision and art. That neither the 'class' nor the 'gender' interpretation by new art historians had recognized this triple structure indicated something rather disturbing: that even the most ... enlightened Western viewers still could not see race clearly ... How could they have forgotten that the Paris of 1865 was the capital of a vast – and expanding – colonial empire?¹²

As Morimura suggests, the codes of desire and power within Manet's work are echoed in a colonialist discourse which expresses possession in terms of rape, penetration and impregnation (of both land and people), whilst the subsequent relationship of the coloniser and colonised is often presented in a discourse that is redolent of a sexualised exoticism. *Out of Africa* opens a space between these binaries, a disruption and a re-invention.

Expanding on these ideas of sexualised exoticism are the bulbous pink anuses and penetrating tails of *I Dreamed of Africa*. Ideas about sexuality are more overtly evoked in this piece, but the viewer's horror or repulsion at their gaping orifices is countered by attraction and sensuality through the employment of tactile textile surfaces. The use of plush fabrics seduces the viewer into desiring to touch them, thereby transgressing the expectation that one may not touch an artwork in a gallery. This indulgent *frisson* of the forbidden may also operate as a (safe) metaphor for the perilous danger implied in desiring to touch the 'other' that is active in discourses of colonialism.

Much of the research involved in this project examined patriarchal systems of power and how hierarchies of thought have been constructed by white men to frame colonial thinking. Ideas about sexuality are part of this territory. In the psycho-geography of colonial Europe, the black male body was a place of imaginary phallic surplus. This construction of a highly sexed 'savage' contributes to and continues the notion of peril for white women in Africa. However, female sexuality has also been framed by patriarchal systems which continue to construct binary identities such as the virgin or the whore. Feminist debates about how Western women might express a dialogue about sexuality and pleasure also continue. How does one talk about pleasure or present ideas about sexuality visually without enforcing patriarchal representations of women? In discussing the practice of Ghada Amer, Maria Elena Buszek addresses this question by suggesting that:

It is undeniable that representations of women in both the art world and popular culture have frequently represented womanhood according to patriarchal myths that feminism has sought to deny. Yet women have always found pleasure, and even power in these very representations, which feminism has also provided women with strategies for subverting. Thankfully, many women artists find in the truth of both these positions a challenge that has led to attempts to represent the very contradiction of feminist sexuality in their work.¹³

The idea of a contradictory feminist sexuality was important to this project, as it provided a way to counter desire as constructed within patriarchal tropes regarding Africa. Furthermore, through this studio work I recognised my adherence to these scripts of desire in my African travel experiences. Consequently "Resisting Africa" became an exploration of resistance: an exercise in unpacking the cultural baggage I carried to Africa. It also acknowledged the surfacing dialogues about sexuality in my practice. This becomes more significant when one considers that part of a dialogue about desire involves an enquiry into pleasure. How one does this as a white woman within the contradictory spaces between patriarchal and feminist structures of sexuality is complicated, political and personal. I believe this exhibition evokes critical questions about pleasure in relation to desire by reworking colonial motifs into configurations which denote new and revised power relationships. This critical reworking of power provides agency for the artist and viewer to re-assess their imagined and real encounters with Africa, in a postcolonial context.

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- 1 Debbie Lisle, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.
- 2 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 97-8.
- 3 Nicholas A Brawer, *British Campaign Furniture: Elegance Under Canvas, 1740-1914* (New York: Abrams, 2001), 19.
- 4 Ibid, 89.
- 5 Anthony Downey, "Setting the Stage; Yinka Shonibare in Conversation with Anthony Downey," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE* (Munich, London & New York: Prestel, 2008), 39.
- 6 Ibid, 39.
- 7 See *Yinka Shonibare: September 8 – November 6, 2004*, an exhibition at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia, <http://www.fabricworkshopandmuseum.org/exhibitions/shonibare.php>, [accessed 1 Apr 2011], and Nadine Käthe Monem, *Contemporary Textiles: The Fabric of Fine Art* (London: Black Dog, 2008).
- 8 Rachel Kent, in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, 12.
- 9 See <http://www.trophyroomcollection.com>, which exemplifies the contemporary trade in African animal curios and furnishings.
- 10 *The Animal Ethics Reader*, eds Susan J Armstrong and Richard G Botzler (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 209-15.
- 11 Peter H Beard, *The End of The Game: The Last Word from Paradise* (Köln: Taschen, 2008), 21.
- 12 Norman Bryson, "Morimura," *Art+Text*, 52 (1995), 75-9.
- 13 Maria Elena Buskek, "Pleasure Principle," www.mariabuskek.com/kcai/Amer_Pleasure.htm [accessed 10 Apr 2011].