

The Back Page "The Cotton Dancer" review by Jia

Opening night party poster featuring Yinka Shonibare 's, MBE, Boy on Globe 4, 2011 this image was acquired Student Engagement Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery & Manchester Museum blog for students Cotton: Global Threads

Whitworth Art Gallery, University Manchester, Whitworth Park, Manchester UK

11 February – 13 May Wall (Qanat) from Tipu Sultan's Tent, (detail) c.1725-50 *Lent by the National Trust from the Clive Collection at Powis Castle, Wales
Photographer: WeAreTape.com Image provided by Whitworth Gallery

The light Sari shrouded a pair of gazing eyes, two pairs of red dance shoes swirling softly to an Indian style as if in a mirror image. The ballet dancer in the images traversed the wefts elegantly like a swan drifting back and forth between the ledges of a music score, silky smooth. Devout labourers tapped their bare feet on the warm sands, dancing on the opening in the forest, under the scorching West African sun with wild abandon. The dancers, clad from tip to toe (save the waist) in the colourful textile characteristic of West Africa, moved their bodies in slow motion. A boy dressed in a short suit of brightly printed fabric reminiscent of the Spider Man outfit balanced on a spinning orange-coloured globe. The intense outdoor lights focussed on a dancer in red next to the window, whose rather painful moves seemed to launch voiceless denunciations, leaving truncated red footsteps wherever she placed her steps. Kids formed a circle to the beats of East African music, making wild gestures under the masquerade of adults...

This was an audio-visual feast held at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, a ball themed 'Cotton', a unique experience marked by cultural hybridity. The theme 'cotton' is soft, tender and tactile; while dance is the most tender and tactile body language that the human body is capable of. In the exhibition halls, cotton carried the diverse cultural backgrounds, which were represented in their different states through the creative mediation of the artists, just as the dancers of different races represented in dance the history of the individual and the nation.

As contemporary art increasingly took on a diverse and globalised outlook without losing sight of its own local and cultural origins, it also had to struggle against the restraints of traditional material in search of the possibility of a macro-space; the advantages of fibre art became increasingly self-evident. 'Cotton: Global Threads', exhibited at Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, not only had its significance of time, but also special local implications. In the 19th century, Manchester was famous throughout the world as 'Cottonopolis' that thrived on the manufacturing and trade of cotton products, where the brand new textile industry that heralded the Industrial Revolution was born. So housing an exhibition about 'cotton' was also to a certain extent a reflection on the city's history.

The exhibition afforded the visitor many perspectives on the exhibits. We were able to see not only the latest creations of seven contemporary artists, but also the collection of historical samples of the products of the local textile industry. What was exhibited here was not just art, but also agriculture, technology and economy that reflected local history and culture.

Yet it would also miss the point if we claim that 'Cotton: Global Threads' offered a summary of the history of the industry. As a university art gallery, the Whitworth is committed both to interpreting art and contributing to academic research. In this case the exhibition provided a postcolonial perspective on cotton's histories. It viewed the history of cotton trade as an aspect of imperialism and colonialism, and was equally concerned with contemporary economic circumstances and the cultural legacies of imperialism. The gallery re-exhibited the historical collections in juxtaposition with contemporary textile works in order to subvert the Eurocentric position of industry and design.

In this exhibition, the gallery, audience and seven artists created among them a kind of open, limitless dialogue. Each artist sets out to re-tell cotton from various angles and cultural backgrounds, creating nodes of exchange that transcended cultures and histories.

Liz Rideal, Drop Sari, 2012. Commissioned by the Whitworth Art Gallery for the exhibition COTTON: Global Threads.

Photographer: Liza Lemsatuf Cunningham, ellelens.com Image provided by Whitworth Gallery

The space immediately inside the main entrance was allocated to Liz Rideal's Ghost Sari. Her work drew inspiration from the traditional Sari material of India, transforming a familiar, everyday object into a mirror image with a unique charm. The textile was represented as a subject, a dancer. The changing patterns on it were a mixture of traditional heftiness and contemporary fantasy, passionate, elegant and effusive. Next to the work was an Indian Sari sample book dated 1866, which showcased the history of British apparel manufacturing businesses in India. This

examination of 'India's textile industry' served as a catalyst for the artist's inspiration. India's textile industry was pushed to the verge of collapse by the British colonial encroachments. The Indus River basin was where cotton emerged first and up until mid-18th century home to cotton textile handicraft, the most advantaged industry in India back then. Yet by late 18th century, British colonial rule had all but destroyed the handicrafts of India, depriving millions of craftsmen of their livelihoods and starving a great number of people to death. The country, once one of the most prosperous regions in the world, became a backward nation held in contempt by the West. Therefore, as we revisited Liz Rideal's work, we were presented with not just the textile glories of Indian craftsmanship, but also the history of encroaching colonialism. Apart from highlighting the most traditional clothing item for India women, the artist was also alluding to the ghostly invasions of colonial manoeuvres that intruded on people's lives. The Saris had most brilliant colours and patterns, but were not exempted from the destiny of fall from grace.

Anne Wilson, *Walking the Warp* Manchester, 2012. Commissioned by the Whitworth Art Gallery for the exhibition COTTON: Global Threads. Photographer: WeAreTape.com Image provided by Whitworth Gallery The second exhibition hall featured three video series *Walking the Warp* and a graphic textile work *Log of Sources: Woven Stripes and Bands* by Anne Wilson. This was a space in slow motion, in which the dancer in ballet shoes elegantly crossing the coloured cotton threads back and forth repeating the warping actions. Such 'accumulations of repetitive performances' became both 'a textile and a soft machine'. The work recounted the migration brought about by the industrial production of textile and reflected the declines in industrial textile production in Southeast US and Lancashire in England, and by extension, global textile production. The divisions between consumer and product, between manufacturer and wearer have become so huge that the globalised supply chains between them are more complicated than ever. The work also represented the concurrent relations between handicraft and industrialised production, between manual operation and machine production.

Like Anne Wilson's works, Kangas from the *Lost Sample Book* by Lubaina Himid also represented the doubleness of presence and absence. The artist created a dance behind masks, cognition of the replaced memories and cultural identity through the reconfiguration of traditional textiles, just as innocent children playing different roles wearing the masks of adults. The artist was inspired by the Kanga from East Africa, a kind of printed cotton fabric used to wrap the body or make a dress. Traditionally aphorisms and slogans are printed on the Kanga, which could then be also seen as a powerful medium of individual rights and political expressions. Hence the texts on these collages became a kind of 'voiceless denunciations'. Grace Ndiritu, *Still Life*, 2005-7
Photographer: WeAreTape.com Image provided by Whitworth Gallery

Similar 'voiceless denunciations' by Grace Ndiritu, who also hailed from East Africa, responded directly to politics with her video series *Still Life White Textiles*. The viewer could peep at the four-video series like belly dancing, yet it also furnished a kind of reverse voyeurism. In this work she used fabric as a medium for simultaneously wrapping and revealing her body. By allowing only a few parts of her body to be seen – her hands running along her thighs as the rest of her body was hidden behind a curtain of African cloth – Ndiritu explored the passivity in her self-expression and explicitly suggested her political intentions. Watching her perform, the viewer became uncomfortably conscious of the transition from spectator to voyeur.

Two artists featuring in this exhibition came from the landlocked African country of Mali. The second largest nation by area in West Africa, Mali's territory is mostly covered by desert. Half of its population does not have access to clean drinking water. Arable land is a scarcity. Yet over half of Africa's cotton production is accounted for by West Africa. Even though we know little of Mali, we could still understand the importance of cotton to this country. As early as the 13th century, grains and cotton were cultivated in the Kingdom of Mali, with large quantities of cotton and gold export to North Africa and further afield. That was the apex of the Kingdom. Then came the colonial period. As a French colony, Mali was reduced to a raw material supplier and cotton was widely cultivated in the country. Even up till now, cotton textile industry remains an important aspect of Mali. So the adoption of cotton as the creative theme implies

One of the fibre works from Mali – *Bosnie, Angola, Rwanda* – was by the dancer-in-red, artist Abdoulaye Konaté. The artist used humble yet brilliant cotton fabrics in various combination to express the strong political themes of genocide. The material - soft to the touch and assembled with such care, could express voices of such power and brutality. The fabric became the language in which the artist could express his social and political positions. Those red 'footprints' marked his denunciations of disease and war, imbuing the work with the grandeur of a Greek tragedy. The everyday West African cotton textiles that constituted the floor piece referred to the recycled cheap products from Europe sold back to Africa, filled with a sense of poverty and quietude. The artist's perspective transcended the boundaries of the nation-state and focussed on other African nations, challenging the whole world with issues shared by many Third World countries, such as disease, war and globalisation.

A work by another artist from Mali, Aboubakar Fofana, *Les Arbres a Blues*, was a particularly intimate one. Perhaps it was due to the traditional indigo dyeing which reminded me of the Chinese equivalent popular in the Jiangnan region, or perhaps it was the dried luffa sponges littered on the ground that reminded me of the daily life of the water town life of the

South. Was it sheer coincidence that this labourer's dance, so characteristic of West Africa, was also imbued with a moist, ambivalent atmosphere that was so often associated with the Jiangnan? Or did it mark an encounter between cottons of different cultures and historical backgrounds in the process of globalisation? The contemporary political metaphor of cotton was both complicated and urgent. Aboubakar Fofana hailed from the Soninke tribe of Ghana, a people with a profound tradition in the understanding of indigo and other natural dyes. The artist spun, wove and dyed local cotton fabrics in order to preserve and renew the cultural heritage of Mali in an organic manner. The Bambara people of Mali regard trees as a sacred symbol that links Heaven and Earth, a divine route to knowledge. The artist adopted the tree as a metaphor to express the prestige of cotton in national culture. In his works, he was committed to the excavation, advocacy and rejuvenation of these traditions. His commitment to the preservation and upgrade of these traditional dyeing and weaving methods could also be seen as an act of resistance to globalised mass production. In the meantime he was also attempting to imbue tradition with new life and a contemporary aesthetic.

The most dangerous dance in the exhibition seemed to be the headless young boy balancing precariously on a spinning globe. The disparate elements were incongruous yet provocative. Who was this anonymous youth? Why did his formal gear look so 'African'? Would he lose his balance if the globe stopped spinning under his feet? Raising all these questions, Yinka Shonibare presented the perfect visual metaphor in his work *Boy on Globe 4*. The boy's identity was as ambiguous as the clothes he wore, which was known as 'Dutch wax' because it was first produced in the Netherlands, based on Indonesian batik designs, and subsequently exported to West Africa. The popularity of Dutch wax in countries such as Benin, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana and Nigeria meant that it was generally perceived there as a traditional 'African' fabric, even though its origins lay elsewhere. The cultural hybridity that ran through every thread of the cloth made this fake 'Indonesian batik print' a powerful visual signifier. Just as the coincidental indigo print in Fofana's work, Indonesia and West Africa were presented in a cultural hybridity that echoed through globalisation. Interestingly enough, Shonibare bought his materials from Brixton market in South London.

The same interlocking strands of economic trade and migration that were so elegantly entangled in Yinka Shonibare's works were unravelled and rewoven, and ultimately ascribed to the first manufactured global commodity: cotton. It is worth mentioning that of all the seven artists exhibited here, five were black, and another had African blood and spend his childhood and youth in Africa. The focus of the exhibition was uniquely set on the most underdeveloped continent of the world, which prompted the question: what does cotton mean to Africa? Since the Industrial Revolution, the demand for cotton and other raw materials in industrial nations have supplanted their demand for consumer products. In the meantime, the increasingly saturated domestic markets of these nations implied the need to open up new markets outside their national borders in order to sell the large quantities of industrial products produced in these nations for profit. Africa thus became the target of encroachment and invasion. At the turn of the 20th century, Africa had fallen helplessly into the abyss of colonial invasions. Even up till now there are still patches of land in Africa under colonial rule. During the colonial period that spanned over four centuries, Africa played the multiple roles, as the colonial powers' raw material supplier, main manufacturing base and biggest market. The disproportionate development of the cotton industry led to the collapse of food and other crops. The former 'Granary of Africa' had a food crisis. So we see whether it is India or Africa, the so called 'Cotton Mills' both benefited from the prospering textile industry as well as fell victim to it. The history of cotton linked up all the national histories of the Third World.

Yet on the other hand, what history did the cotton threads link up for the industrial nations of the West? Cotton had to wait until the 9th century to be imported to the Mediterranean region, before its introduction to Britain and North America. However, by the 18th century, England still relied on India for cotton fabric imports, which were considered luxury products. The emerging cotton textile industry was restrained by fewer guild and government regulations, which explained its rapid development, along with the fact that it required relatively smaller investments and operated on a smaller scale. The popularity of cotton products with all the strata of British society meant that there was a steadily growing demand. In order to protect the industry from international competition, Britain imposed a ban on the import of prints from India, Persia and China. To improve efficiency and lower the costs, many technological innovations and breakthroughs were made in the textile industry. The invention of the spinning Jenny marked the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and by extension the rise of the Western World.

As we moved through the ground floor of the gallery, historical industrial products and commodities took us on a tour of the world alongside the contemporary art works on exhibition. Cotton's versatility has enabled designers across the world to create new patterns and styles of clothing, including the most common t-shirt and jeans. We also learn about cotton's 'dirty secrets' including the continuing use of child labour and the environmental impact of the use of pesticides in cotton production, as well as the cotton crisis hitting contemporary Africa and their national economies that are so closely linked with cotton. 'Cotton: Global Threads' moved beyond a thematic explication, which was primarily founded on its materiality and aesthetic appeal, to its values within a nexus of economic, social and cultural realms.

Cultural hybridity was a strand that ran through the entire exhibition. Cotton was both the theme of the exhibition, and that of the city, and by extension, the theme of the entire era, a cultural theme. Just as an artist put it, 'Cotton embalms, surrounds, muffles, covers, stretches and breathes with us — from the cradle to the grave.' This

brought us back to man’s intuitive encounter with cotton, which was tactile, olfactory and visual. Yet cotton’s history revealed more diversity and contemporaneity, which allowed us to reflect on the widespread globalisation and postcolonialism as well as to interrogate where the interactions of cultural hybridity would lead.

Wall (Qanat) from Tipu Sultan’s Tent, c.1725-50 * Lent by the National Trust from the Clive Collection at Powis Castle , Wales

Photographer: WeAreTape.com Image provided by Whitworth Gallery

This ball was opened in the quiet gardens of the University of Manchester on a morning in early spring 2012. The modern dances choreographed by seven contemporary artists and traditional dances of Manchester were played out quietly and in good order. Outside the exhibition hall, the sun solemnly kept watch of the tall Indus trees, whose leaves were moved to rustle by the breeze. At night, as the visitor passed the gallery, they could still see the sari dancing on the windows of the gallery, an extension of the Indian dance in the form of architecture, illuminated by LED lights. The ball at night seemed no less enticing than during the day. It spread quietly across the city and attracted visitors from across the world to enjoy the feast that had cotton as its theme yet extended far beyond its boundaries.

Xu Jia April 14th, 2012

Bio: Xu Jia is a graduate student at the China Academy of Art who did her BA at the College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University. In the fall of 2007 she did an Exchange to Rhode Island School of Design, USA, Major in Architecture. As an artist she has been exhibiting since 2008. She attended the Kaunas Biennial 2011 with Shan Zeng of the China Academy of Art, and Shi Hui (Head of Fiber and Space Art Studio, one of the Directors of the Hangzhou Triennial which is preparing for “Fiber visions” First Hangzhou International Fiber Art Exhibition taking place in China in 2013. This same group then came back from Europe, were they visited the UK, searching for artists, visited London and Manchester where they saw the Cotton: Global Thread" exhibition.

Cotton: Global Threads <http://cottonglobalthreads.com/>

<http://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/whatson/exhibitions/cotton/> * you can read about Tipu Sultan’s Tent, c.1725-50 from the National Trust from the Clive Collection at Powis Castle, Wales in Oxford Asian Textile Group Newsletter No. 19 June 2001 p.7-8 The Tent of Tipu Sultan by Sara Burdett [then Collections and research assistant, National Trust Wales] p 7-8