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**THE SHELLEY & DONALD RUBIN FOUNDATION
AT THE 8TH FLOOR ANNOUNCES**

Narrative Obsession in the Post-Colonial Psyche

Curated by Anjuli Nanda Diamond and George Bolster



(Left to right) Yinka Shonibare CBE, *Hybrid Mask (Koré) II* and *Hybrid Mask (Bamana Ntomo)*, 2023.
Wood acrylic paint and brass. Courtesy of the artist and James Cohan, NY.

**The 8th Floor
17 West 17th Street, NYC
May 16 – July 13, 2024**

New York, NY – March 26, 2024 - The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation is pleased to present *Narrative Obsession in the Post-Colonial Psyche*, a new group exhibition at The 8th Floor. On view from May 16 through July 13, it will explore post-colonialism from the perspective of 12 artists addressing the harmful global histories and present-day legacies of imperial subjugation.

Featuring: Firelei Báez, Gerard & Kelly, Brian Jungen, Hew Locke, Joiiri Minaya, Frida Orupabo, Keith Piper, Umar Rashid, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Elisa Sighicelli, and Kara Walker.

Post-colonialism as an area of study began in the field of literature through an assessment of Western-centric projections onto characters in fiction. It has since expanded to include the disciplines of art, anthropology, philosophy, and sociology. A foundational text on the subject is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which exposed the European fantasy that denigrated colonial subjects through constant Othering and fetishization across Asia and the Middle East. Although many aspects of Said's original argument have been refuted as restrictive in geographic, cultural, pedagogical, and religious scope, cultural institutions have been deconstructed through this metatheory since the early '80s.

Narrative Obsession excavates the layering of diverse histories through the impulses of artists engaged by works of literature in both fiction and fact. Artworks on view challenge institutional power structures, address problematic legacies within current states of settler colonialism, and highlight the discreet colonial impact of industry and tourism upon the environment. Unlike the literary tradition, artists are not confined to the theoretical strictures of research; their approach to the subject ranges from documentary-like narratives to a proliferation of fantastical ones, essentially reversing the European colonial gaze which governed, manipulated, or destroyed forms of cultural expression considered as "Other."

Cultural projection aimed at subjugation, particularly in the form of religious assimilation, was an immensely powerful tool for colonialists, resulting in the conforming of hearts and minds, reinforcing the mores of Europe. In **Gerard & Kelly's** *Panorama* (2021), the self-aggrandizing murals *Panorama du Commerce* (1889) of the Bourse de Commerce in Paris (former stock exchange) are given voice by performers who symbolize Future, Allegory, and Memory. Each section of the piece's representational narrative is meant to symbolize modernization through global trade. The enormously scaled work visually demonstrates Western projection onto a myriad of New World countries and cultures.

Keith Piper's *The Trophies of Empire* (1985/2017) similarly addresses the resplendent palaces of Europe, in this case Plantation House in London. Taking the form of a slide presentation, the accompanying narrative states: "You look at this building and wonder how many hours of underpaid black labor it took to build." The accruing of wealth that enabled the erection of such spectacular construction was partly due to, as Piper quoting Marx says, "turning Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins." Colonists were not "a great civilizing, Christianizing force," as was often claimed. Racial profiling and its continuance in Britain highlights how Othering promotes racial tension through extending colonial narratives in post-colonial contexts.

Trophies of a different ilk are addressed in photographs by **Elisa Sighicelli**. The entitlement of early 20th century colonial Europe and the subsequent emergence of eugenics allowed an entire continent to implode. Fascism ran rampant, and the cultural production reflecting this movement has become challenging in terms of conservation and display. Museum holdings of artists considered to be culturally and historically significant, but also made objects reflecting a problematic ethos, are addressed in *Untitled (1075)* (2021). In the storeroom of Galleria Arte Moderna Milano, Sighicelli photographed statues in their un-curated state. Amidst the teeming cluster of figures in the composition, there is a Balilla boy (Italy's equivalent of the Hitler Youth) giving a fascist salute. While this particular statue has never been exhibited, the ideas of empire building, white supremacy, and fascism have returned in Italy today. A large group of men gave

fascist salutes in central Rome on January 7, 2024 to mark the deaths forty-six years ago of three neo-fascists. This worrying development can be seen in differing forms of aggression internationally, in addition to the seeming amnesia of its outcomes, as the Second World War falls out of living memory.

Monuments are harder to hide. Public sculptures commemorating political, monarchist, or army leaders have come under immense scrutiny in recent years, especially in the American south. **Kara Walker**, a self-described “unreliable narrator,” referenced her drive past the Victoria Monument on the Mall in London as having inspired her work *Fons Americanus*, a Turbine Hall commission at Tate Modern in 2019. The fountain, like most of Walker’s work, takes inspiration from narratives derived from literature and history. Instead of the Winged Victory allegory atop the Victoria Monument, there is a figure of an African woman with water pouring from her throat and breasts. The artist, who often begins making her works by writing, has said of the piece: “I wondered how to return the gift of having come to be through the mechanics of finance, exploitation, murder, rape, death, ecological destruction, co-optation, coercion, love, seafaring feats, bravery, slavery, loss, injustice, excess, cruelty, tenacity, submission and progress conceived in the U.S. to live in this time and place with this opportunity this ability.” Her spectacular litany of experiences of those who drowned or survived their journey to the New World, is a monument to those lives and deaths, a counter-narrative to history as written by the victors.

Readdressing hegemonic narratives in order to control them—and in the process correcting skewed histories that flattered those in power—is continually present in the works of **Umar Rashid**. In *Gaius Catullus, or Jerry, Duke of Charleston. (South Carolina). Plotter (2021)*, the artist attributes and strips away elements of truth conflating them with fantastical accounts, taking ownership over the often tragic outcomes for rebels, runaways, and oppressed peoples. Their tongue-in-cheek tone ensures a compelling visual experience, viewing history as fluid and highlighting it as propaganda essential to the colonialist project.

Rashid’s color palette and excavation of history are reminiscent of the strategies employed by **Firelei Báez**, whose paintings and works on paper address similar issues from a feminist perspective. In *Patriarch (2013)*, a kaleidoscope of bright colors is applied directly to the male portrait, removing the gravitas in how men were portrayed in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Here, Báez complicates this history further with the depiction of an anonymous white person, possibly symbolizing toxic masculinity.

Early attempts at anthropology, which became formalized as a field of research during the Enlightenment period, were egregiously ethnocentric. The outrageous theories carelessly projected on non-Europeans are unpacked in the work of **Frida Orupabo**. Tackling images from web-based photographic archives related to colonialism and anthropological research, works such as *Without Guilt (2022)* span an unspecified range of time. Source images are direct computer screenshots, which Orupabo then uses as compositional blocks for collage by blowing up the photographic elements. There is implicit violence in the cut sections in the bodies she represents, referencing the brutality of the unconscious biases displayed over time by researchers.

UK-based **Hew Locke** addresses American colonialism in works such as *Souvenir 15 (Martha Washington) (2023)*. “Lady Washington,” as she was referred to, was wife to George Washington, the first president of the United States and a prominent slaveholder. Although she did free her husband’s slaves after his death, her active complicity in human bondage during her

lifetime is subtly referred to by the excessive trappings of empire-like decorations applied to a porcelain bust of her figure.

Skewing, correcting, and exploding existing historical narratives is also explored in the practice of **Yinka Shonibare**, whose use of Dutch wax fabrics make his work immediately identifiable. In *Hybrid Mask (Koré) II* (2023), the artist reclaims the overarching influence of African art on Modernism in a process he refers to as “Picasso in reverse.” He acknowledges that “Picasso was interested in appropriating from another culture, and I also appropriate from European ethnic art.” Through highlighting this fact, his focus is to enable a new conversation within contemporary society about diasporic influences. The African masks address Shonibare’s identity as a “post-colonial hybrid” who, like Walker, is a summation of the legacies of oppressed ancestral histories.

The contemporary reality of global trade is that corporations ensure the supply of cheap products to the mass market, often in the form of fast fashion. Our complicity in this machine of capitalist production is questionable, promoting a quiet colonialism that favors the cheapest manufacturers, frequently in countries with terrible working conditions where poverty is rife. Discreet corporate practices—mirroring former colonial strategies—are excavated in the works of **Joiri Minaya** and **Brian Jungen**. The latter’s sculptures heavily feature goods from these companies. *Variant #4* (2016) deconstructs Nike Air Jordans, drawing on the aesthetics of the artist’s Dane-zaa heritage to question cultural stereotypes and global work practices. Gated tourism in Haiti that benefits Royal Caribbean cruise lines is dealt with in Minaya’s video piece *Labadee* (2017). The artist utilizes text from Christopher Columbus’s diary from when he first saw land to pose the question of what has changed in terms of exploitation. The privately managed island paradise inside the fence—where food and pleasure are plentiful—is contrasted by a group of young boys with plates, begging in the actual country adjacent to this enclosure. Can there really be such a state as post-colonial when the systems of manipulation in poorer nations still give way to pricing and access determined by former colonists? Is post-colonialism instead discrete colonialism, where money funneled through companies is not explicitly sully the reputation of identifiable countries? Is it another type of fantasy, and ultimately just a narrative?

About the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation

The Foundation believes in art as a cornerstone of cohesive, sustainable communities and greater participation in civic life. In its mission to make art available to the broader public, in particular to underserved communities, the Foundation provides direct support to, and facilitates partnerships between, cultural organizations and advocates of social justice across the public and private sectors. Through grantmaking, the Foundation supported cross-disciplinary work connecting art with social justice via experimental collaborations, as well as extending cultural resources to organizations and areas of New York City in need. sdrubin.org

About The 8th Floor

The 8th Floor is an independent exhibition and event space established in 2010 by Shelley and Donald Rubin to promote artistic and cultural initiatives. Inspired by The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, the gallery is committed to broadening the access and availability of art to New York audiences. Seeking further cultural exchange, The 8th Floor explores the potential of art as an instrument for social change in the 21st century, through an annual program of innovative contemporary art exhibitions and an events program comprised of performances, salon-style discussions, and those organized by external partners. the8thfloor.org

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#NarrativeObsession #PostColonialism #RubinFoundation #The8thFloor #ArtandSocialJustice

For media inquiries, please contact: Max Kruger-Dull, max@bluemedium.com 212.675.1800

Image description: Two images side by side of two masks mounted on small black pedestals, against a white background. Both made of wood acrylic paint and brass, the mask on the left has red and yellow leaves against a light blue and white pattern, with an elongated nose and tall ears. The mask on the right has swirly red branches against a light-yellow pattern, with tiny eye holes and more abstract elements on its head pointing upward, perhaps a helmet.