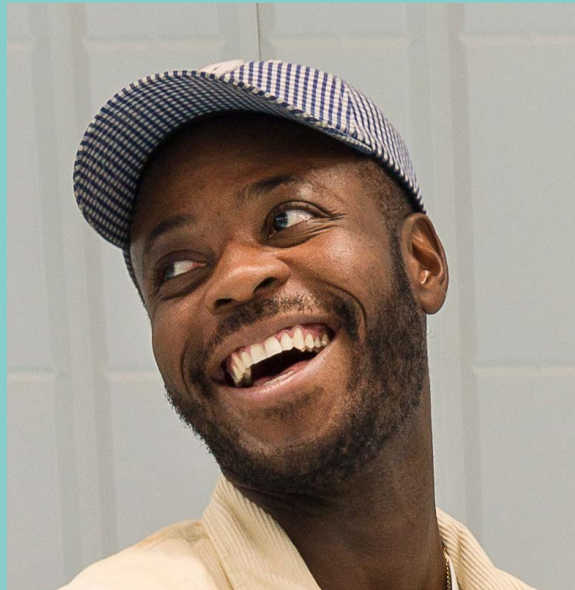


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Yinka Ilori is uplifting London and beyond with his joyful, celebratory approach to art and design. We chat to Ilori to find out what lies behind his bright, geometric creations.



Yinka Ilori, Andrew Meredith

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Yinka Ilori is sat on a sofa in his west London studio, wearing a green cap and a camo jacket. From the corners of the zoom screen, stacks of cardboard boxes can be made out on either side. “I’ve just launched my first homeware collection, so the studio has become a kind of studio-slash-warehouse at the moment,” he laughs.

If you live or have visited London in the last couple of years, you may well have seen Yinka Ilori’s work. The artist and designer created The Colour Palace in the summer of 2019 on the lawns of Dulwich Picture Gallery – the second biannual pavilion to be featured there. The wooden frame is a riot of bold colour and geometric patterns, inspired by the vibrant fabric markets of Lagos. He also designed the exhibition Get Up, Stand Up Now for Somerset House in the same year, temporarily transforming the muted classical halls into bright, joyful corridors to celebrate 50 years of Black creativity in the UK. In February 2021, he launched a series of murals with creative agency Jack Arts, occupying billboards across the UK, with the simple, powerful message: ‘if you can dream then anything is possible’. He’s designed playgrounds, skate parks, sculptures, hotel lobbies, window displays, furniture collections, and recently, socks.

“I produced these socks for a company online – they print your face on a T-shirt, that kind of thing,” he says. “I thought the socks looked kind of nice. I posted it on my socials and they went mad. I thought it was interesting that something so simple could get people so excited. That’s when I got to work on my homeware collection.” Launched in summer 2020, the stoneware bowls, enamel mugs, hand-knotted Tibetan rugs, and lively cushions, plates and trays are as joyful as his larger installations, with patterns and colour intersecting in a vivid celebration of his Nigerian heritage. Ilori was born and grew up in an estate in Islington to Nigerian parents, who moved to the UK in the 1980s. “Everything I do as an artist and a designer references my culture and my upbringing,” he says.

The collection is set around three patterns, which take Yoruba words as their titles and creative cues. “They all mean something, just like my name Yinka means something; it is short for Olayinka, which means ‘surrounded by happiness and wealth.’ I’m still waiting on the wealth part to come through though,” he laughs.

The pattern called *omi*, named for the Yoruba word for ‘water’, sees a deep blue colour set against a lively, sinuous wave design. “That was inspired by a project I worked on at the Royal Docks,” he says. “I was interested in the historic trade that happened around there, of rum

barrels and fruit and veg coming in from the Caribbean. If you look at the pattern, you see oval, drum barrel shapes within the waves. I wanted to remind people that the UK was not built by the British alone; it is a product of collaboration with other countries – a cultural exchange. I want to celebrate that; it’s one of the reasons I love living in London. It’s such a multicultural place with so many different people and food and languages and identities. We’re really lucky to live in that type of space.”

The celebratory energy of Nigerian music is also weaved through Ilori’s work, present in his choice of colours, fabrics and forms. His parents would play King Sunny Adé and Fela Kuti around the house when he and his three siblings were growing up. “I’ve got to show you man,” says Ilori, unzipping his camo jacket to reveal a tie-die Fela Kuti T-shirt underneath. “He is an incredible person. Music was a big part of my upbringing. I think it provided my parents with the chance to escape from the stresses and hardship of living in London. That is the power and beauty of music: you can dance and sing melodious songs and it can make you feel so joyful. As I got older and my ears became more mature, I started to pick apart what these artists were saying. Fela Kuti talks about police brutality, corruption, civil rights, freedom of speech – these issues that people are still fighting for now, in Nigeria and around the world. When I listen to his music, I feel really empowered – it does something to my creative output. I went to Lagos last year and visited the Fela Kuti shrine. It’s incredible. There’s this massive party there, people are dancing and drinking and smoking. You go in there and – you just feel a certain way,” he laughs.

Perhaps Ilori’s most powerful works are his public art installations, among them Happy Street, a permanent installation below a bridge on Thessaly Road in Battersea. The work was commissioned as part of the 2019 London Festival of Architecture to transform what was a grey, nondescript walkway beside a school into a joyful, energising space, filled with invigorating colours and exuberant geometric forms, uplifting passers-by and members of the local community alike. “That was a very special project,” says Ilori. “I love civic projects because it gives something to those communities that feel forgotten or unloved. At Thessaly Road, you’ve got Battersea Power Station right there – multi-million-pound apartments and penthouses. Not everyone can afford it. But if I can give something to that community that feels like it’s not included in those developments, then a piece of public art is the biggest thing I can offer. It provides a sense of ownership, of belonging. And I hope it becomes

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Happy Street, Luke O'Donovan

“I wanted to give people that sense of hope, and provide something for when they were out walking their dog or with their loved ones. All we could do at the time was walk, run or ride a bike – there weren’t any galleries to go to – so public art was all we could see.”
– Yinka Ilori



Helping Hand, Veerle Evens

01 If Chairs Could Talk - Ilori's practice began with upcycled furniture. He would salvage forgotten chairs from the streets of London and paint and upholster them in bright fabrics and colours. The chair here, Helping Hand, is from his 2015 collection If Chairs Could Talk.

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a destination that people travel to go and see – a moment of magic that uplifts the area.”

As part of the project, Ilori hosted a month of workshops with local schoolchildren at the community hall, asking them to create their own definition of happiness. “I really care about inspiring the next generation of children growing up in these forgotten places,” he says. “I want to help them believe they can be anything they want to be – artists, architects, fashion designers. I was very lucky that my parents supported me and my siblings when we were growing up. Their attitude was like, ‘ok, you’re not very good at maths, but you want to be an engineer – let’s get you a maths tutor!’ I want to give kids that kind of encouragement. I hope Happy Street can be a reminder to them that, you know what, this was done by a kid who looks like you, and probably grew up like you, and you can achieve that too.”

The same spirit can be found in Ilori’s mural Love Always Wins, created for Harrow Council: a three-storey redbrick wall enlivened with a technicolour vision of sunrises and geometric ice cream cones. “That was really special for me because I lived in Harrow and had my studio there until 2019,” he says. “I had a really good relationship with the community. My studio was right beside a school. My window was really colourful – it was painted by an artist friend of mine – and the school kids used to walk by and knock and ask if they could come in. There were two twins that would let themselves in every morning – they’d just open the door and have a look around. I thought that was great they could get access to an artist’s studio like that. When I was asked to make the mural nearby, I accepted straight away – it was an honour to be allowed to do that in that space. I get texts from people saying ‘wow, you’ve made my walk up Harrow so joyful and happy.’ That’s why I do it. The work doesn’t belong to me; it belongs to the people that get to interact with it and look at it and smile.”

Ilori also made public works in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in June 2020, working with creative agency Jack Arts to occupy a billboard in Blackfriars with two temporary murals in support of the NHS. The power of the murals is in their bold, simple messages, which read, ‘better days are coming I promise’, and ‘as long as we have each other we’ll be ok’. “I have a belief that we will look back in years to come and think, ‘wow, we actually overcame that together,’” Ilori says. “I wanted to give people that sense of hope, and provide something for when they were out walking their dog or with their loved ones. All we could do at the time was walk, run or ride a bike – there weren’t any galleries to go to – so public art was all we could see.”

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“When people interact with my work, I see their smile just getting bigger and bigger,” he says. “It starts with just their teeth, and then it opens up and up. I love that kind of emotion that you just can’t control. People sometimes forget objects are capable of evoking that kind of happiness in them. It’s like getting a stitch: it just happens automatically – you’re trying to stretch it out and stop that stitch but it’s still happening and you can’t stop it.”

“I think people remember my work too,” he continues. “They remember it because it is something you have to experience with someone you love. I think that is the beauty of colour. When you see colour or see pattern or experience something that is so immersive, you want to tell someone, like ‘you need to go and see this piece by James Turrell.’ You want to share it with someone, create a moment with someone, create a memory – you want to share it with people you love.”

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Yinka Ilori Portrait, Jack Arts