HEW LOCKE

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Every Toy Jaguar Has Its Place

With a dazzling palette of beaded tapestries, blinged-out boats, and distinctive reliefs of Queen Elizabeth II, Hew Locke comments on the relationship between England and its former colonies

BY ELIZABETH FULLERTON

Barely recognizable under a swathing mass of plastic hares, insects, black beads, and M16 assault rifles, Queen Elizabeth II stares out unnervingly from Hew Locke’s 2004 portrait Black Queen by the Guyanese British artist Hew Locke. At the time when Locke was making the work, with the Iraq War in full swing, terrorists were bombing commuter trains in Madrid. The piece reflects the paranoid mood of the moment. “It’s a portrait of the monarch in a state of fear,” Locke, 54, explains in his slow Guyanese lilt over tea in his studio, situated beneath a railway arch in Brixton, a diverse neighborhood of South London.

More than six feet tall with long hair and bushy sideburns, Locke is best known for his distinctive carnivalesque reliefs portraying the queen in the context of Britain’s violent colonial past. In a sense these works are portraits of the nation. Locke has an ambivalent relationship with the British monarchy, owing largely to his upbringing, first in Scotland and then in the former British colony of Guyana on the Caribbean coast of South America. British intervention in the tiny nation dates back to the 16th century and the Elizabethan courtier Sir Walter Raleigh’s pursuit of El Dorado, the fabled city of gold. Locke references history in a relief portrait of that title depicting the queen in

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gold, arrayed in glowing jewels and outstretched swords.

As Locke remembers, the run at his Anglican school in Guyana inspired him for drawing a mustache and beard on the picture of the queen printed in his notebooks when she was still head of state. “Her early images do make me feel physically ill,” he says, “but I’m drawn to that unpleasantness, and it’s not a hating of that person. It’s a touchstone. I come back to from time to time,” he adds.

His background and a passion for history inform Locke’s work, which, over the past 30 years, has explored themes of colonization, globalization, and power structures. It encompasses room-size cardboards installations, collaged photographs, bead tapestries, drawings, and mixed-media sculptures, and is replete with layers of references that traverse continents and centuries: Indian miniatures meet Congolese fetish figures meet Tudor portraits. “By assembling sources from vastly different times and places, Locke lays bare the way state power is vulnerable to the passage of time and the inevitability of decay,” Kobena Mercer, professor of history of art and African American studies at Yale University, wrote in his 2011 book Strange in Paradise.

Locke’s process has been described by art historian Sanjay Mehta as a “mental Moulines,” or (cool

processer, into which experiences are tossed, mixed around, and transformed into chimerical creations. But any appearance of haphazardness belies the meticulous way in which the work is produced; every toy jaguar and every head has its place. As he works, Locke listens to audio books ranging from Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose to Sherlock Holmes tales. “That’s what drives the work,” he says, “I can’t survive without this, basically.” Occasionally he alternates the audio books with music, especially soundtracks composed by Ennio Morricone, famed for his spaghetti-western scores. “If I’m struggling, I’m always amazed how Morricone comes on and shapes things.” he says. “And I feel, ‘Ah, okay, don’t panic, this guy is there!’”

Locke has had solo installations in London at Tate Britain, the Institute of Contemporary Arts, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as shows at smaller galleries in Europe, China, and the United States. Last year he is having a solo exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London, which will coincide with a new commission for the former warship HMS Belfast, and there will be a show in November of new work at London’s Hales Gallery, which represents Locke. In October, he’ll participate in Prospect 3 New Orleans.
For Those in Peril on the Sea, 2011, an armada of model boats suspended from the ceiling at the Pérez Art Museum Miami.

you’re at the mercy of the sea.”

Rohan Ostrander, chief curator at the Pérez, was instrumental in selecting the piece. It was inspired by votive boats that had been given by sailors to Portuguese churches. “It really blew us away. There are so many different entry points to it,” says Ostrander. The work’s cultural relevance to Miami was a major draw, as was Locke’s reputation as a respected voice on issues of black Caribbean identity. “He has quite a following,” the curator notes. “He’s been at the periphery of the London art world at times, but he also has strong visibility in other circles—his reach is beyond London.”

Boats occupy a longstanding place in Locke’s personal iconography. Born in 1959 to a British mother, who was white, and a Guyanese father—both of them artists—Locke lived in Scotland until 1966, when the family moved by boat to Guyana (the name Iayuna derives from an indigenous American word meaning “land of many waters”). The artist’s ties to boats fed into his work, Hemmed in Two (2000)—a
Ordinary Shares.


Erectic and he began covering everything, including this piece, with "exotic" signs: "Out of Home in Two Years Cardboard Palace" (2002), a structure with alcoves and nooks, and laden with portraits of royalty and heraldic motifs as well as signs such as "Fragile," relating to the mediciun's use as shipping container. Although very different in appearance, Locke's cardboard works share many of the themes and the visual exuberance of his multi-colored wall hangings and his relief of coats of arms, his collaged photographs of historical statuaries, and his lavishly embellished sculptures. "I'm obsessed with the Baroque; it's an ongoing fascination of mine," the artist says.

In response to the London art scene's newfound taste for exotica after years of favoring the in-your-face grimmness of much Britart, Locke, in 2007, created his own fake mythology in a series of photographs titled "How Do You Want Me?" influenced by Jihadist videos, "swagger portraits by Van Dyck," and the 1972 Jamaican gangster movie "The Harder They Come," the works present imaginary

The photo *Serpent of the Nile (Gejant)*, 2007, is an edgy blend of Hindu, Catholic, and Mexican Day of the Dead Iconography.
tyrants toting weapons who are almost invisible under the ill-gotten wealth and flowers cloaking them top to toe. "It's about making something knowingly exotic to be consumed—playing with a whole bunch of stereotypes," says Locke. "It's making a dark bogeyman for our times who's going to come and eat your babies." Despite considerable commercial success, the artist has been on the wrong side of the trends for the big institutions, being considered either too foreign or too homegrown, which both frustrates and amuses him. "Everybody's hunting for the latest thing, but what if the latest exotic, cool thing is around the corner? Give me a solo show at Tate Modern, and I'll blow your socks off! In other words," he asks, "how do you want me?"

Locke used to resist biographical readings of his work; these days, however, he embraces the personal influences that shape it. He traces his interest in punk and reggae to boyhood memories of killed bagpipe bands marching through Edinburgh and credits his love of color and kaleidoscopic excess to the tropical vi-

biance and cultural diversity of Guyana, where浣思,

h, and Muslim festivals are widely celebrated. Locke is married to Indra Kharma, an artist and cura-
tor he met in the early 1990s when both had studios in a squatter's building, along with the British Nige-

rian artist Yinka Shonibare. By way of hobbies, Locke enjoys visiting stately homes, traveling, and collecting "weird things," such as obsolete share certificates,

which have featured in several works, including Gold

Standard. The piece consisted of enlarged certificates pasted temporarily across a building facade for the 2012 Deptford X Arts festival in South London.

Over the past year, Locke has branched out into

new mediums in two projects. The first, a bronze sculpture of a black moon goddess explod-
ing in stars, titled Selene (2013), was commissioned for the facade of a hotel in London's Soho

district. The second, Mummy's Little Soldier, depicting a glass voodoo doll, was shown at the Glassstress group exhibition "White Light/White Heat" at the 2013 Venice Biennale and subsequently at the Wallace Collection in London.

Despite the variety of materials he employs, Locke regards all of his art as interconnected—"like DNA," he explains, "it loops and twists around." He says his aim is simply to create hauntingly vivid works. He marvels at Titian's graphic 1558 painting The Martyr-
dom of St Lawrence and Velázquez's 1650 Portrait of Pope Innocent X, which he finds so lifelike he ex-

claims: "God, you bastard, you'll kill me without

blinking!" Locke sees the power of his own reliefs as being in the figure's eyes, which he adds right at the end of a work. "So when I put eyes on the queen, it's for you to come and think, God, that has a reality to it," he says. "That's what I'm trying to do—to make something that gets under people's skin."
The bronze sculpture Seleno, 2013, which updates a Greek goddess in the figure of a black woman, is informed by the Baroque, Art Nouveau, Victorian fairy tales, and more.