

Fullerton, Elizabeth. *Every Toy Jaguar Has Its Place*, ART news, April 2014

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



Cultural mixmaster Hew Locke.

Barely recognizable under a seething mass of plastic lizards, insects, black beads, and M16 assault rifles, Queen Elizabeth II stares out unnervingly from her 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

Elizabeth Fullerton is a freelance writer based in London. She is working on a history of Britart to be published by Thames & Hudson.



Locke's *Black Queen*, 2004, is festooned with beauties and beasties.



gold, arrayed in gleaming jewels and outthrust swords.

As Locke remembers, the nuns at his Anglican school in Guyana reproved him for drawing a mustache and beard on the picture of the queen printed on 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 colonialism, globalization, and power structures. It encompasses room-size cardboard 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 *Stranger in Paradise*.

Locke's process has been described by art historian Sarat Maharaj as a "mental Moulinex," or food

processor, 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 bead 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. Later this 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.



Locke's elaborate works have, at times, been relegated to the category of folk or naive art, yet they are the product of a solidly trained artist, who earned a B.A. in fine art from Falmouth School of Art and Design (now Falmouth University) and an M.A. in sculpture from the Royal College of Art in London. His work sells for \$16,000 to \$385,000 and is collected by the Tate, the British Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Pérez Art Museum Miami, among other institutions.

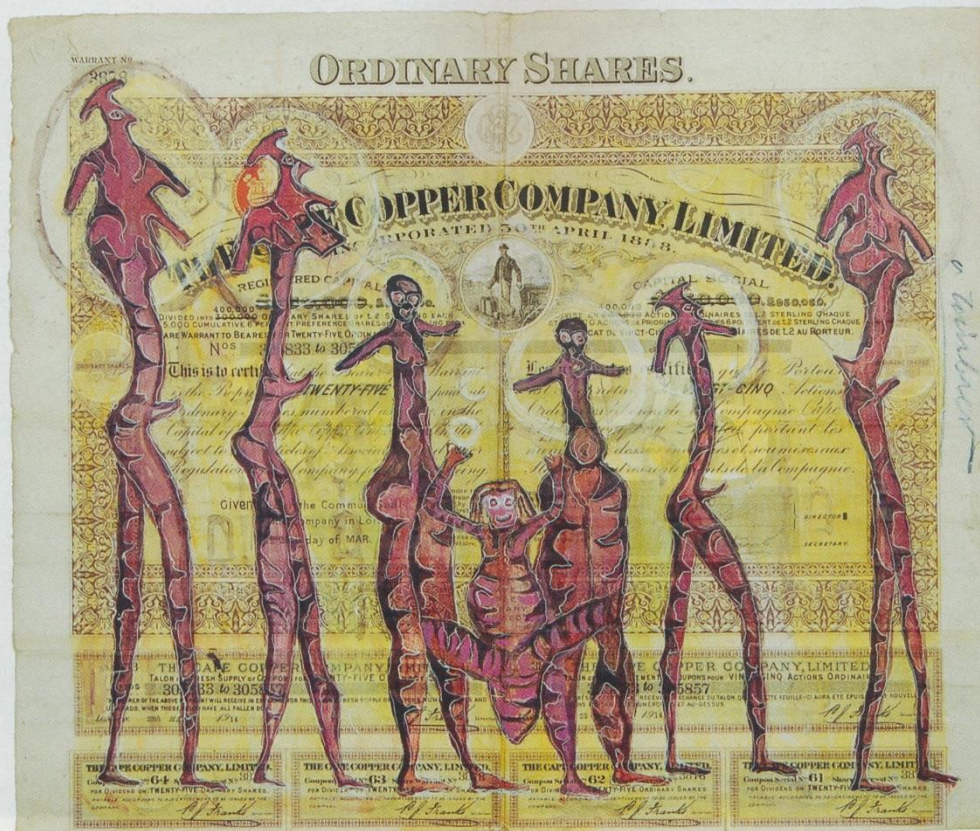
For its relaunch last December, the Pérez Art Museum Miami (formerly Miami Art Museum) bought and installed a version of Locke's monumental 2011 work *For Those in Peril on the Sea*. Featuring a motley armada of 79 fishing boats, Chinese junks, Arab dhows, colonial-era clippers, and pirate tankers suspended over the foyer, the work appears to float above visitors, creating the impression that they are submerged under water. "Miami is a city of migrants so it's about getting debates going with people who've arrived by boat," Locke says. "The tanker is referring to pirates in Somalia; there are references to the 2011 Japanese tsunami. It's about everybody in the ocean," he adds, "and once you're out there,

***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."

Tobias 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 Guyana derives from an indigenous Amerindian word meaning "land of many waters"). The artist's ties to boats fed into his work *Hemmed in Two* (2000)—a



Folkloric animal-human figures bedeck company share certificates in the satirical drawing *Cape Copper*, 2009.

rambling, ornate, domed cardboard creation, part Mughal palace, part houseboat, and part collapsing homeless shelter that marked Locke's first big break.

Global trade routes, the fairground, the circus, and Kurt Schwitters's collaged "Merz" constructions are all elements that pervade the work, which was acquired by the American collectors Eileen and Peter Norton in 2000. "You can't underestimate how big a deal that was," the artist says. "Everything that's happened to me in the 14 years since is because of that. Every artist needs his defining moment."

Shown in 2000 at the V&A, the intrinsically transient, fragile piece was "a brilliant response to an incredibly imposing space," art historian Marcus Verhagen says. "Very often, in very good work there is this element of obsession. You get the feeling this had to be made—the sense that these things had a certain urgency, and that came from this kind of compulsive engagement with certain history," Verhagen adds, referring to the artist's complex relationships with both Britain and Guyana.

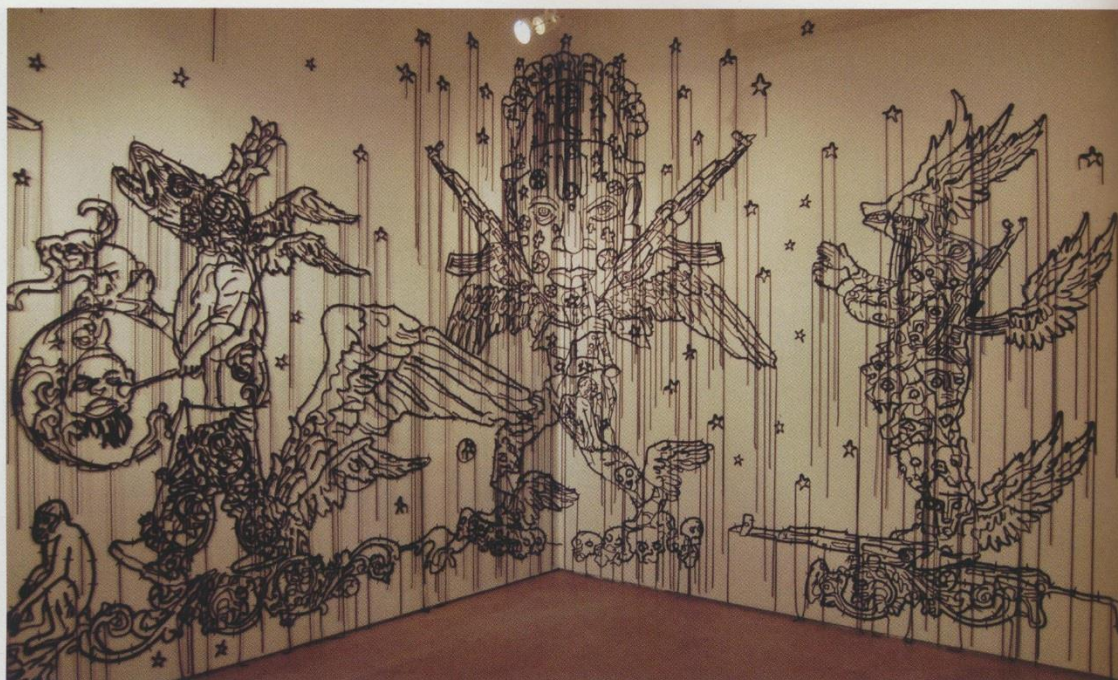
Locke describes how he had been feeling "hemmed in" at the time by having his work categorized as

"exotic," and he began covering everything, including this piece, with "export" signs. Out of *Hemmed in Two* grew *Cardboard Palace* (2002), a structure filled with alcoves and nooks, and inlaid with portraits of royalty and heraldic motifs as well as signs such as "Fragile," relating to the medium'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 multicolored wall hangings and his reliefs of coats of arms, his collaged photographs of historical statues, 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 grime 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," African studio portraits, and the 1972 Jamaican gangster movie *The Harder They Come*, the works present imaginary



The photo *Serpent of the Nile (Sejant)*, 2007, is an edgy blend of Hindu, Catholic, and Mexican Day of the Dead iconography.



Locke's installation *The Nameless*, 2010, made of cord, plastic beads, and gaffer tape, taps into the narrative art of the past, outside of time and sequence.

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 pomp and regalia to boyhood memories of kilted bagpipe bands marching through Edinburgh and credits his love of color and kaleidoscopic excess to the tropical vibrance and cultural diversity of Guyana, where Christian, Hindu, and Muslim festivals are widely celebrated. Locke is married to Indra Khanna, an artist and curator he met in the early 1990s when both had studios in a squatter's building, along with the British Nigerian 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 exploding 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 Glasstress 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 Martyrdom of St Lawrence* and Velázquez's 1650 *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, which he finds so lifelike he exclaims: "God, you bastard, you'd 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 *Selene*, 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.