HEW LOCKE

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Don't Panic®

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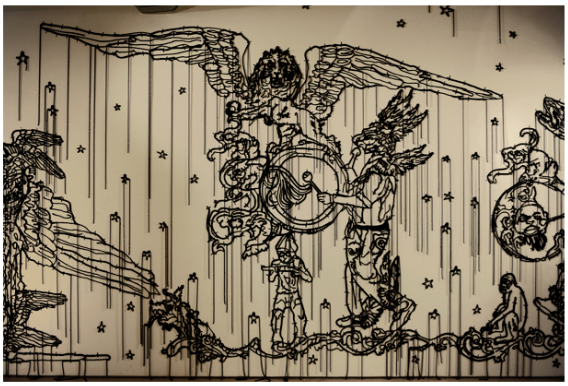
Written by **Natasha Hoare** / 08 Nov 2010 / 0 Comments



*The work of **Hew Locke** is a welcome relief from the cold formalism that dominates much art in the UK. His colourful, plastic bedecked sculptures fuse traditions from different cultures, religions and historical moments to create emotionally charged new forms that speak in a truly universal vernacular.*

Nominated for the 4th Plinth, involved in the Folkestone Triennial, and opening a new public art project in Bristol this month with public art commissioners Situations, he is an artist who has worked hard at finding his own artistic language and is now deservedly at the top of his game.

His new project in Bristol sees him cast gravestones for corporations which have gone bust throughout history – a fitting reaction to the current economic crisis. Don't Panic caught up with him.

You are involved in all the major art projects going in the UK at the moment, from the 4th Plinth to the Folkestone Triennial, how does it feel?
I'm doing OK so far, I just happen to be a bit more busy at the moment. It's great, hectic, but really good. The 4th Plinth nomination was really great. It's a very difficult thing that plinth. The shortlist came in and I spent a month, night after night, walking up and down the square and trying to work out what was going to work in that space. After a lot of soul searching I came back to the history of the site, and that it was originally intended for an equestrian statue. For ten years or so I've been working on a series of projects on impossible proposals. This is a collection of photographs of statues that I have carefully painted. So I found this statue of Field Marshall George Stuart White, he was a Victoria Cross winner in the second Afghan war. And the more I looked into him I though this is a piece that will work. I wanted to blow it up to life size and cover it with medals and votive objects. I was looking also at the time at Ucello paintings of battles, and all the horses wear these horse brasses – so I though right, that's what I want, horse craft, medals and gold objects. It's about cycles of history turning and moving. But it's also about the fact that we walk past these statues every day, and we don't see them. You can go down Whitehall, and pass the Cenotaph without a second look, but come November dressed with poppies it becomes highly visible and charged with emotion. I want people to pause to look at historical things. But it's a carnivalesque object as well, I'm mixing all these ideas.

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Does acceptance and celebration of your work change the work in any way?
Um, yes to a certain extent. You need an audience for your work. You need to come out of the room you work away in. The work comes to live beyond you when people are looking at. My proposal for the plinth and the other projects are not me dictating how you should perceive this piece – you should come along and say how you want to perceive the piece. People coming to see my work is wonderful, it's a validation.

Do you feel your work references your life in Guyana?
It does reference it, you can't remove yourself from your background. I mean I've been living here for 25 years, but it's a complicated background. Migration has been an ongoing theme in my work. Those buzz words 'Multiculturalism', and 'Postcolonialism', I'm tired of them, if anything we're in a post-post-colonial stage and Multiculturalism is simply the reality we live in today, you can't deny it. In my work I like to talk about history and ideas of power. It's become a very glib throwaway thing, and I think we are in a period of complexity you know. And hence my proposal for the 4th Plinth is not a straightforward thing, it reveals itself over time. A complex piece for complex times – I mean look at this coalition parliament!

You use inexpensive materials like plastic bead necklaces – is this in order to engage your work with concepts of low culture, or are you an obsessive collector?
A bit of both! I am definitely an obsessive collector. I buy beads all the time. I like the idea that you can make something out of what was seen to be absolutely nothing. I also like the fact that some of these cheap things are pretending to be expensive. You can buy earrings that pretend to be gold but cost nothing – I love that saying 'all that glistens is not gold'. There's so much on Brixton Market, I walk around there just to think. Some traders come to expect me and there are certain trimming shops that know me well, and if they don't see me in a while then they get a little worried.

Your work at the Hales Gallery, for the exhibition The Nameless, is quite different from your usual three dimensional work.
I've created these pieces before, they are usually heraldic and made out of four materials – black cord, black beads, glue and gaffer tape. Simple cheap materials. Tate Britain has some in their collection. This time I wanted to do it in London on a sizable scale. And I was thinking about this quote by John Huston, "You walk through a series of arches, so to speak, and then, presently, at the end of a corridor, a door opens and you see backward through time, and you feel the flow of time, and realize you are only part of a great nameless procession."

So it's about the free flowing, the intuitive, with imagery ranging from a flying death like figure, to child soldiers, to a cherub riding a tiger. All my work is a fusion of loads of different cultural references, and that comes from Guyana. I grew up as a matter of course celebrating Hindu festivals. I'm not Hindu, but it was natural. We would celebrate Holi, and throw coloured paint and powder at each other. And to come to here, for me, the multicultural thing is like, "Hey, I grew up in that". So my work is a fusion of these things. It's like carrying a huge trawler net behind you, trawling for ideas.

From India, to Naples, my idea's come from everywhere that I've been. I'm very interested in the ways that simple images have innumerable meanings. Some forms come from personal memories. There're a couple of monkeys there in the show shouting at the visitors when they enter the Gallery. When I grew up in Guyana my landlady had a monkey as a pet, it's one of my childhood memories. I remember him using his chain as a rope, swinging out to me and grabbing a bun out of my hand! It's a real, vivid, and emotional memory.

Hew Locke's *Ruined* launches November 13 at Brunswick Cemetery Gardens. The 4th Plinth Commission winner will be announced in 2011.