

HEW LOCKE

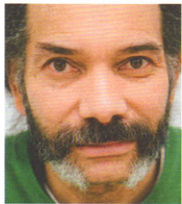
Debika Ray, Rituals and Royalty, Crafts Magazine, Issue 277,  
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## INSPIRATION

On the eve of his show at Ikon Gallery, the artist talks to *Debika Ray* about Bonnard, the royal family and why boats regularly feature in his work

# Rituals and royalty

## Hew Locke



**Your output is diverse – it includes painted photographs, decorated boats and busts of British royalty. What are the threads that tie these together?** History, and how it affects us today, is important to me – if I wasn't an artist I would have been a historian. I was born in Britain, but I spent my formative years in Guyana and that has also shaped the way I see the world. I'm looking at this country as an outsider.

I grew up seeing a Queen Victoria statue outside what used to be the law courts in Guyana. After independence, it was dumped at the back of the botanical gardens on its side with the head broken off. That was quite a shock – to realise that nothing in life is permanent. It took me a while to work out that the reason I was using royal family images in my work was to do with the memory of that statue. It also appears in a piece called *Hinterland* in my upcoming show at the Ikon Gallery – lost in a swamp in a jungle, surrounded by the ghosts of Empire.

**The aftermath of the Brexit referendum will be remembered as a pivotal moment in Britain's history. How might this inform your work?**

A lot of my work is about the shifting sands of time and how the past influences the present. Some people don't want to talk about Brexit, but it's a reality. There's a national identity that has been shaped through a particular image of Britain borne from a long time ago that continues to pervade.

Previous moments of crisis have fed into my work: after the financial crash in 2008 I started buying share certificates from dead companies. On top of the Chinese share certificates from the 1890s, I superimposed a map of Africa. Why? Because a hundred years ago, if you talked to the Chinese government, they would not have believed that it would be possible that today they would be the main player in Africa.

**How does your choice of materials continue this exchange between past and present?**

The busts I make – some of which are featured in the exhibition – are an example. They are covered in replica

medals from the Zulu War and the Benin Expedition, and brass cut-outs of the Benin Bronzes. It's about the burden of history. I like to use brass because it looks like gold, but it's not. Anybody can afford a small brass token. Through my artwork, I'm elevating this cheap material into something grander. I find my materials all over the place – online, or when I'm travelling. I'm constantly on the lookout and picking up bits and pieces.

**A recurring motif in your work is the boat. What brought that about?**

The word Guyana means 'land of many waters'. To get there, you needed to travel by boat. For years after leaving, I would make a boat annually as a kind of security blanket and that expanded to become a major part of my practice. It's to do with the idea of migration and refugees, and the fact that the sea is a great leveller. My boats are inspired by vessels across the globe and come from a kaleidoscope of imagery – both photographic and things I've seen. In this show there will be old galleons mixed in with rusting hulks from now.

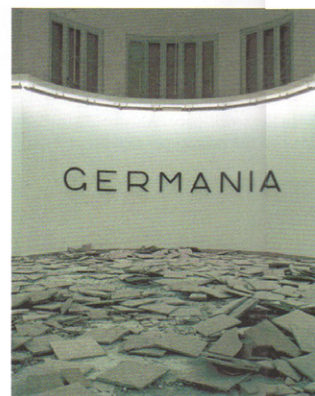
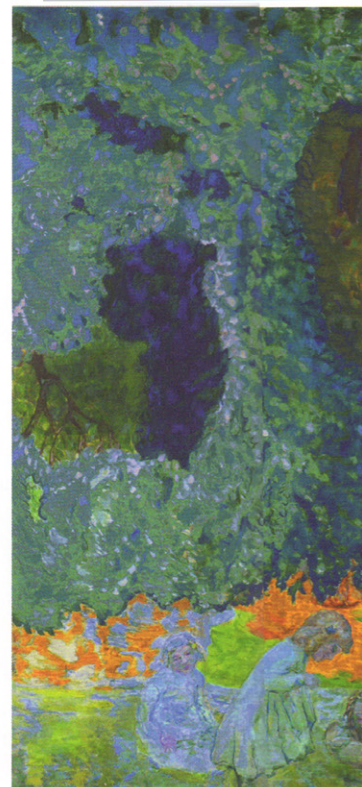
**Your parents were also artists.**

**How did that influence you?**

They were artists and art teachers, but they didn't teach me. Art became a part of me by osmosis. I absorbed it – it was around me and it was something I couldn't escape. One work that my father owned had quite an impact on me: a strange, surreal painting of a volcanic landscape with the Queen's head coming out of it. That influenced the images of the Queen I made myself many years later, some of which feature in the show. Inspiration comes without me quite realising it.

**How has living in London shaped your practice?**

I spend a lot of time walking around its museums. I often head down to the British Museum to see the Benin Bronzes. The Victoria and Albert Museum has a real hold on me because it's so big and varied. There is a miniature painting of the mixed-race daughter of a British official in 18th-century India that I'm drawn to, because I find the identity of this



Top: Pierre Bonnard, *L'Ete (Summer)*, 1917. Above: Hans Haacke's *Germania* installation at the German pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1993, photo by Roman Mensing



Below: one of the 34 boats from Hew Locke's series *The Wine Dark Sea*, 2016



unidentifiable young woman interesting. It must have cost a fortune to get her painted, but nobody knows who she is.

**How do these kinds of objects influence your work?**

They slowly feed into it; not immediately, but after a while. I went to Spain more than 15 years ago and saw *La Macarena*, the statue of the Madonna in Seville, and from that a whole adornment thing kicked in. This Madonna fed directly into my royal family images. I'm going back to Seville for the *Semana Santa* procession. That kind of thing is important to me: carnivalesque rituals, but also devotional rituals across religions.

Another piece that has inspired me is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, a Songye figure from the Democratic Republic of Congo – a big, dark-coloured wooden figure from the late 19th century. It really scared and disturbed me because it's got a snake wrapped around it. I had to draw it to come to terms with it.

**Is drawing an important part of your process?**

It's a constant, but what I do lately

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is take shots on my phone. I've got thousands of images from museums all over the world. Quite often, I'll be on the Underground and I'll scroll through them, reminding myself of some painting, sculpture or weird little artefact. I've done photography at various points in my career – for example, photographing statues and painting over them and decorating them. I've also used photography to document all the amazing wooden architecture in Guyana, which is fast disappearing because wood has become very expensive.

**What other artists have inspired you?**

The guy who had an impact on me years ago – and I used to be embarrassed to talk about – is Pierre Bonnard. He's so not cool, but he had an impact on my drawing style and his use of colour had an impact on me. I'm really looking forward to seeing a show of his work at Tate Modern (until 6 May).

To be honest, I struggle with the whole canon of Western art – I find it a bit of a strain. But I like it when I discover something for myself, for

example *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* by Titian. This guy is being roasted on a barbecue at night and you can almost hear the wind blowing the brazier.

In 1993 I went to the Venice Biennale for the first time. Outside the German pavilion was a massive plastic Deutsche Mark and inside I could see a photograph on a red wall of Hitler and Mussolini at the 1934 Biennale. I thought, OK, I know what this show is going to be – it will be archival. Then I walked inside and the red wall was propped up by pieces of wood, and behind it the marble floor of this 19th-century building had been smashed to pieces by the conceptual artist Hans Haacke. On the back wall in bronze letters, it just said 'Germania'. I thought, wow. It's the kind of piece you needed to see without anybody telling you about it.

In an ideal world, you want to make art that works whether people know what they're going to see or not. That's what I'm trying to do.

*'Hew Locke: Here's the Thing'* is at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 8 March – 2 June. [hewlocke.net](http://hewlocke.net)

BONNARD: FONDATION MARCHET ET AMBROISE MARCHET, SAINT-PAUL, FRANCE. COURTESY TATE

BOAT: PHOTO CHARLES LITTLEWOOD. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HALES GALLERY, LONDON