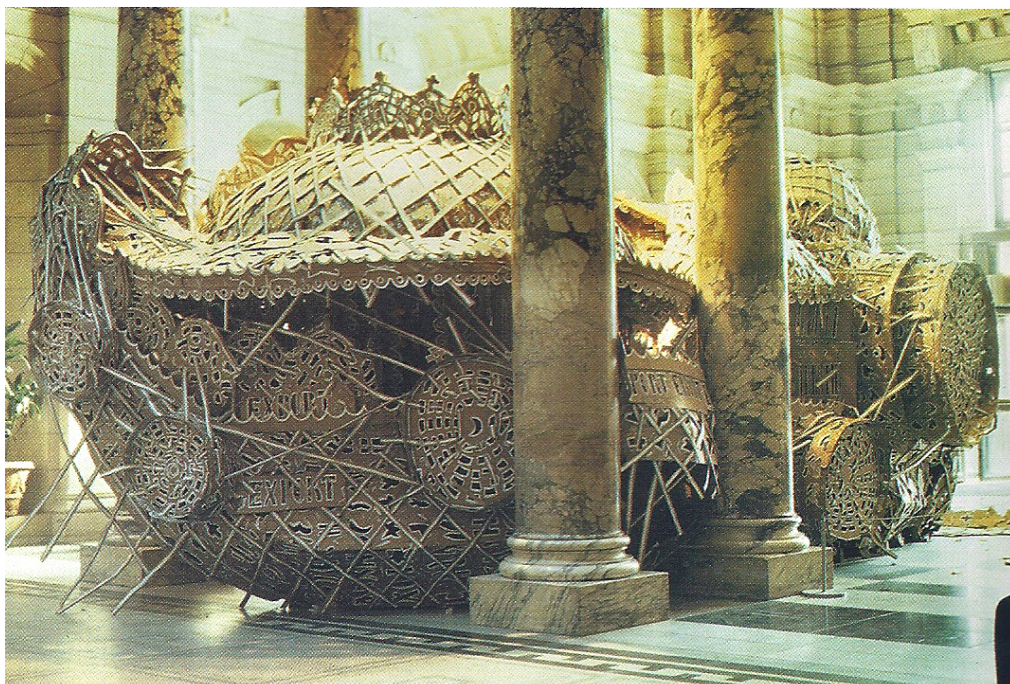


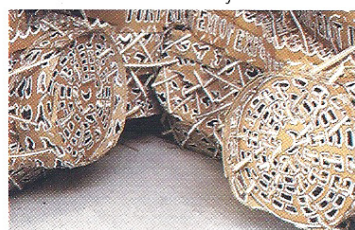


Hew Locke

HOUSE OF CARDS



below: Norwich Art Gallery



foreword

Introducing an artist to new audiences is always exciting, especially when that artist is quickly gaining an international reputation but has not previously exhibited in this country. When the artist's work flaunts and flouts perceived notions of taste, decorum and identity, as Hew Locke's does, things get more interesting still.

Hew Locke makes magnificent objects from cheap, unspectacular materials: cake decorations, paper garlands, crocheted remnants, and plastic toys. And yet, for all their surface gaiety, there is nothing about them that is easy to swallow. Locke was born in Scotland and spent most of his youth in Guyana, moving to England as an art student. Growing up in the 'colonies' gave him an ironic distance from Britain and the colonial mindset. His portraits festooned with gaudy baubles parody the kind of art often sold in airport gift stores, suggesting that the western imagination both fears and feasts upon the exotic in its midst. Locke is critical of the ways in which artists are categorized according to their presumed ethnic affiliations. In using cardboard as the basis for many of his pieces, he comments on the packaging and commodification of artists and their work.

The satirical impulse runs deep in Locke's work. His portraits of members of the British royal family are at once affectionate, humorous, and grotesque. Like the house of cards of the exhibition's title, the monarchy is depicted as precariously close to collapse. And yet there is nothing overtly critical about the series, hovering as it does between moral and emotional registers. It will be exciting indeed to see how this playful approach to Queen and Empire resonates with American audiences.

This is the first publication to focus on Hew Locke's work. We are very grateful to essayist Gean Moreno for teasing out the subtle yet stubborn complexities in the artist's work. We are deeply indebted to Paul Hedge, Paul Maslin and Ella Whitmarsh at Hales Gallery for their invaluable help with coordination, and to Indra Khanna in London for her assistance in facilitating the show. This exhibition could not have been achieved without the combined efforts of the staff at both the Luckman Fine Arts Complex and the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. We have benefited greatly from this collaboration, on practical as well as personal levels. Finally, we thank Hew Locke, both for creating this astonishing body of work and for working so hard with us on all aspects of fabrication, coordination, and installation.

Hew Locke: House of Cards

Hew Locke presents difficulties. He scrambles codes, shuffles disparate elements to uncomfortable proximity, fosters impasse—all in an effort to run interference on interpretation.

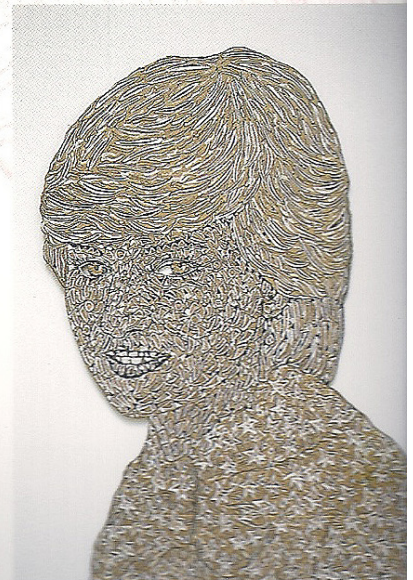
Raised in British Guyana, he's an unruly subject. For empire, surely, but I meant for those who set up camp on the trade routes of identity politics, and still use essentialisms as currency. The main difficulty in Locke's work is tightly strapped to its unflagging ambiguity. One's reading of the work is constantly forced to shift between antipodal fields—say, the critique of imperialism and the limitless glee of flea-market hunting, or the licentious appropriation of festive popular forms and the cognitive mapping of post-colonial spaces. One is never quite sure where interpretation feels right and unequivocal, where intentionality really manifests itself. Dizzying oscillation, a constant switch up without syncretical reformatting, is the governing motion in one's head. It is in the shifting sands of this indeterminacy, of the vacillation between the myriad possibilities, where the rumblings of the carnivalesque can first be picked up. One hears, holding court here, the laughter that erupts in light of the unmerciful contingency that governs the real. It's God's laughter, as Milan Kundera has called it, which is the totality of our own little contributions—the chuckles that punctuate our incessant and failure-bound pursuit of fixed and final answers. Rising out of indeterminacy, the carnivalesque taxes the notion of essential identity that meaning and exegesis so often and quietly rely on.

Picking up signals of the carnivalesque isn't so much a matter of zooming into Locke's use of gaudy flea-market trinkets and ephemeral pick-up-and-go materials; or the appropriation of Victorian fairground architectures and other disobedient structures; or the employment of large cardboard heads of the Royal Family, embellished with kitschy dollar store trinkets; or the presentation of wicked little portraits, often parodying Old Masters prints, made of skulls. It has more to do with marking the steady pace of one's repeated attempts to find some fixed meaning in the work and failing. Or not failing—it's not that definitive. But it's certainly the accumulative pattern of coming up short again and again; a pattern that leads to the realization that something will be left out every time. For instance, if one chose to approach Locke's work by highlighting his dirty poetics of gleaning and gluing, of endless mark making and cutting out, things—the engagement with the history of British imperialism, to point out the most obvious—are excluded. Otherwise, linking Locke to people like Joseph Cornell and Gertrude Stein, like Jess and Emily Dickinson, amazingly complex cultural versions of the toiling homebody, would be a smooth operation. But the evident shortchanging roadblocks the approach. The work recoils; it performs an about-face and foregrounds a different facet of itself.

Other readings fare no better. Using biography as a starting point opens a comparative game with other artists born and/or raised in former colonies, which no doubt casts Locke as the odd man out. Where are his explicit politics? Where are his rage and loathing? Or, conversely, where are his cool-headed anthropology or sociology? Beyond this, such a reading presupposes that a term like 'Guyana' denotes something stable, instead of acknowledging that it's shorthand for a semantically slippery hybrid space where multiple ethnic lines met involuntarily to enact a strange genetic swap. Africans, East Indians,



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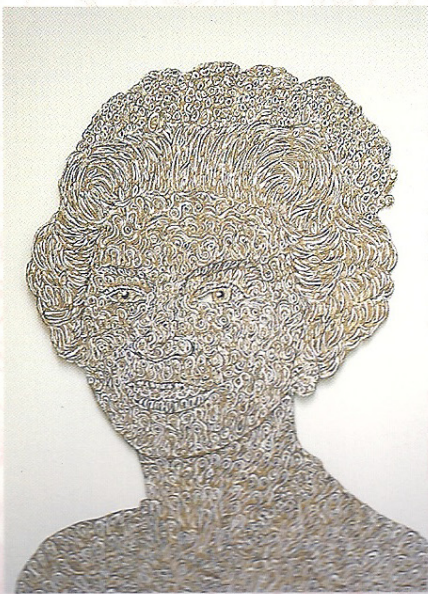
Chinese, the various native populations, early Dutch settlers, the British colonizers—they all contributed to the construction of the heterotopic space and syncretic ethnicities that cluster around this name.

I don't mean to imply that favoring the biographical in this case is without benefit. Clearly, it elucidates a great deal about Locke's work. It explains why for Locke, who obviously shares a connection with neo-baroque Cuban novelist Severo Sarduy, every skin—even "pure" Royal skin—is always a palimpsest, and every mark is a tattoo inscribed on a body. But it's more than the self and its environs that are textualized here. Like any other interpretation, the lip of this one closes in without incorporating all that emanates from the work. It leaves untouched, for example, that very dimension of the work that taxes all hermeneutics for their intrinsic normative imperative, that constantly divests interpretations of authority. And what sparks the laughter of the carnivalesque if not the plate tectonics of rising and falling interpretations, the friction of their shortcoming rubbing as they come in and go out of view, the ultimate impasse that results and emblemizes our failure to give relative human truths divine finality?

And what of the ubiquitous Royals that populate Locke's exhibitions? The Queen's portrait, Locke has said, could often be found in his school textbooks, and defacing it with a beard or wig would land one in big trouble. Benign as the fact sounds, it certainly conjures up the history of British imperialism and reveals how deep its violence reached. But if Locke's constant turning toward the Royals is only an effort to denounce imperialism, then the Royals are simply stand-ins—a powerful substitute, it's true, but a substitute nonetheless. Cardboard cutouts, indeed. Obviously replaceable, why have they become so indispensable and central to Locke's work? And what of his avowed fascination with them? Why does a sense of earnestness, a desire to depict without contempt or critique or mockery as the guiding force, begin to settle over the work? Ambiguity has a fearsome poker face; it's difficult to determine if there even is a bluff to call here.

Possibilities, when considering how to read Locke's work, pile up like heaps of dollar store junk. And yet, following any one in particular leads to a dead end of sorts, to incompleteness. But incompleteness always conveys something. If nothing else, it points to a crisis of representation, a loss of certainty, an impossibility of disclosing with precision. In Locke's case I think that this delirious celebration of impasse is ultimately bound to the possibility that, while post-colonial spaces may continue to be occupied on a conceptual plane, there is room for new, heterogeneous narratives of self-definition. Like the nonofficial, extraecclesiastical festivals of the Middle Ages that Bakhtin writes about in *Rabelais and His World*, Locke's humorous and hermeneutically slippery objects embody an adversarial stance vis-à-vis the solemn claims of official culture, which invariably has a monopoly on the production of knowledge and places an auspicious premium on fixed meanings. Locke's work posits the possibility of "a second world...outside officialdom" where the ruse of essential identities, lines of purity, and the a priori superiority of one tradition over all others is exploded. In doing this, the work challenges those blind to the need for multiple perspectives in the cognitive mapping of post-colonial (and other unstable) spaces so that they are not codified to serve outside interests that often see liberation where occupation is taking place.

—Gean Moreno



Happy Queen



Smile