

# CREATIVE LOAFING

## Strange love

Pop culture and royal devotion at the Contemporary

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From an outsider's perspective, the British treatment of its royals can seem bizarrely conflicted: familiar and folksy while at the same time fawningly deferential. Brits seem to view the royals as part of the family, just the part you have to curtsy and genuflect before.

*House of Cards* at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center is an extended contemplation of that contradiction by Hew Locke, the son of Atlanta artist Donald Locke. Hew was born in Scotland, raised in Guyana, educated in Britain, and lives in London, and he clearly approaches the subject of English royalty from that complicated background.

Locke explores the "common folk" deification of the queen and her clan, but identifies something slightly silly and definitely kitsch in the way this reverence manifests itself. Catholicism has a similar tendency toward extremism in its bloody Jesuses and gothic imagery that also brings an extreme image bank to devotion. Locke taps into a related streak of worship and excess in royal-mania, which he expresses with more plastic beads, sequins, fake jewels, lace and marabou than even Liberace could tolerate.

In the hilarious, grotesque "RIP (Queen Mum)," Locke ornaments a wood cutout of the Queen Mother like a Mardi Gras float. Somewhere between Howard Finster and *Sensation's* Chris Ofili lies Locke, whose tongue-in-cheek adoration-meets-defamation knows no limits. Recognizing the delusional aspect to hero worship, he loads the Mum down with so much froufrou, only

her piercing blue eyes suggest a person dwelling inside the straitjacket of kitsch. She looks far from pleased by the adoration. In Locke's hands, embellishment becomes insult.

Less ornate but equally wry are Locke's billboard-sized cutouts of Queen Elizabeth, Princess Diana and Prince Charles executed in the amusingly low-tech material of cardboard. Again, the humble hand of the hoi polloi asserts itself in the pedestrian material. The images are folk artsy and fun as they literally bore holes in the facade of the ruling class.

Locke's good-natured kitsch takes a sudden turn for the macabre in a second, more ambiguous and less persuasive body of work featuring 11 charcoal-and-pastel portraits so elaborately embellished with fussy, decorative detail that the people he sketches are devoured by their backgrounds. The artist finds a degree of horror and monstrosity in this *Siren* series devoted to mythological figures and mercenaries, a detour from the toppled royals in *House of Cards* that fails to pay off in spades. Excess is clearly Locke's forte, though it seems to work best when cheekiness and a sense of fun ride shotgun.

The kitschier elements of *House of Cards* play well next to the Partridge family references and bubblegum pinks of the Raleigh art collective Team Lump's *Goodbye Says it All*, also at the Contemporary through Jan. 8.

Either someone's pumping hallucinogens into Raleigh's water supply, or the kids at Team Lump have been spending too much time painting indoors with the windows sealed tight. The Contemporary has given over a segment of its gallery to the art cooperative, which has installed a head shop worthy survey of trippiness. The work ranges from Gary Smith's clever action-figure robots and sorcerers crafted from Reynolds Wrap, to an army of rag dolls riding pink sea creatures like something out of Frank Herbert's *Dune* performed by a nudie cast of Holly Hobbys. Team Lump artists share a love of cheapo, crafty materials, and an often purposeful amateurism that offers a wet raspberry to art world seriousness. The artists clearly imbibed toxic levels of pop culture with their Cocoa Puffs.

While Locke traffics in ironic, malice-tinged devotion, the artists of Team Lump are pop culture's biggest boosters, earnestly acknowledging the steel-trap grip pop culture's seductive image bank has had on their lives.

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