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# Hew Locke, *The Procession*

## Georgia Gerson

Tate Britain, London

Curated by Elena Crippa, Senior Curator, Modern and Contemporary British Art, and  
Clarrie Wallis, former Senior Curator, Contemporary British Art

March 22, 2022—January 22, 2023

**Georgia Gerson** is a current PhD candidate at the University of York. Her research project is concerned with what NFTs can teach us about the creation of value in the contemporary art market. Passionate about all art forms, alongside her academic work she works as a freelance marketing and communications manager for a number of female-led dance companies.

What I try to do in my work is mix ideas of attraction and ideas of discomfort—colourful and attractive, but strangely, scarily surreal at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Hew Locke

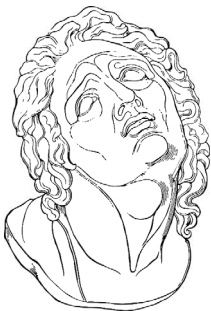
The grand, high-domed, neoclassical Dunvean Galleries at Tate Britain have been infiltrated by a carnival, but it's not quite like any you have seen before. Entering the galleries from the main rotunda, a cacophony of almost one hundred and fifty life-sized figures process the hall towards you: children and adults—some on horseback, carried in litters or held aloft on the shoulders of others—waving flags and bearing icons. To a number, they are bedecked in extraordinarily elaborate costumes, wearing masks of all kinds.

It is a shocking celebration of colour and scale, a veritable feast for the senses. Except, there is something unnerving here too: an eerie sense of absence. You feel at once part of this procession, and yet separate from it. You see the characters and can almost hear the sounds of the drums the children are beating, but silence pervades and their eyes look straight through you. It is as if in stepping through to the galleries you have stumbled into another dimension, a carnival parade of ghostly apparitions caught in perpetual motion.

It is precisely this masterful creation and harnessing of these tensions that marks the work of British artist Hew Locke. Born in Edinburgh in 1959, Locke spent his formative years in Guyana before returning to the UK and, I would argue, becoming one of the most prolific and important figures in contemporary British art. Locke's work encompasses drawing, painting, prints, photography, sculpture and site-specific installations, which explore the legacies of Empire, post-colonialism, the financial histories of the slave trade, statuary and cycles of history and power through a deliberate and intricate layering and weaving of materials, symbols and motifs.

The 2022 Tate Britain Commission: *The Procession* is his most ambitious work to date and the scale and complexity of the work almost defies comprehension. There are elements here that reference the entirety of his practice, such as his characteristic mixing of media, like incorporating cardboard, fabric, beads, costume jewellery and found objects in the installation's construction. Furthermore, his career-long obsession with statuary—often explored through embellished photographs, plaster busts or medium sized sculpture—finds fruition here in the creation of these life-sized figures.

I also notice costumes and masks taken directly from his controversial work *The Tourists*, an intervention on board the HMS Belfast commissioned by the Imperial War Museum, in which the wax figures used as museological props to show the daily activities of



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Figure 1. Hew Locke, *The Procession*, 2022, mixed media, dimensions variable. Tate Britain, London, Collection of the Artist. © Tate Photography.



the sailors are hijacked by the artist and are instead preparing for a Trinidadian carnival. The military references, royal insignia, floral motifs and garish colours are reminiscent of his 2007 life-size photographic self-portrait series *How Do You Want Me?*, which deals with themes of identity, state power, and nationhood (currently on view in *In The Black Fantastic* at the Hayward Gallery through September 18). His *Share* works, which embellish original share certificates from defunct companies to draw attention to their complex financial and trade histories, are blown up onto fabric to create skirts, bodices, flags and drum skins. The same is true of his painted photographs of old wooden stilted houses in Guyana, remnants of Empire that are deteriorating due to rising sea levels and the exportation of wood from the country.



Figure 2. Hew Locke, *The Procession*, 2022, mixed media, dimensions variable. Tate Britain, London, Collection of the Artist. © Tate Photography, Joe Humphrys.

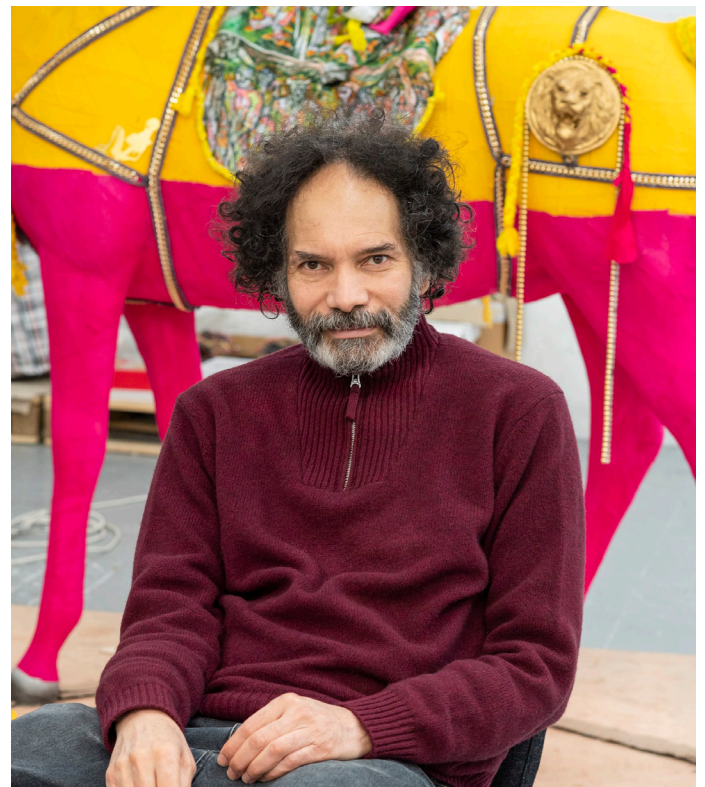


Figure 3. Hew Locke. © Tate Photography, Matt Greenwood.

As a site-specific commission, *The Procession* has also been created in direct conversation with Tate Britain's Dunvean Galleries. The institution's founder, Henry Tate, was an art philanthropist whose fortunes were made in the trade of sugar during the 19th Century. Drawing attention to the relationship between the institution's history and its position as a site of display in our current contemporary context plays to Locke's interests and strengths: *The Procession* is littered with references to the history of the sugar trade. Furthermore, renditions of works from the Tate's collection are transferred to fabric and used within the piece itself. One of the main reasons the work is so arresting is the confrontation between the starkness of the neo-classical space and the vibrant carnival taking place within. Locke physically occupies the building as a relic with an installation which highlights alternate histories and people that have traditionally been excluded from contributing to the narrative of Empire and colonialism.



Figure 5. Hew Locke, *The Procession*, 2022, mixed media, dimensions variable. Tate Britain, London, Collection of the Artist. © Tate Photography



Figure 6. Hew Locke, *The Procession*, 2022, mixed media, dimensions variable. Tate Britain, London, Collection of the Artist. © Tate Photography

As with all of the artist's oeuvre, there is an almost overwhelming layering of reference points. The figures literally carry the weight of the baggage of our collective histories of violence and power. However, Hew Locke is a master of spectacle, illusion and storytelling, and *The Procession* offers an almost unparalleled opportunity for engagement, learning and exploration through art. There are hours of looking and unravelling available here, but there is also a chance to revel in the joy of sensory overload and the sheer ambitiousness of it all.

Leaving the exhibition galleries is like exiting a dream, one in which a celebratory carnival descends to an eerie circus which combines the past, the present and the future in one chaotic and revelatory moment. One thing is for certain, Hew Locke's procession will continue marching forward through time and memory long after the exhibition comes to its end in January 2023.

## References

- 1 Tate Britain Commission 2022, "Hew Locke: The Procession," Press release, March 21, 2021, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/tate-britain-commission-2022-hew-locke-the-procession>.