



q/a

Mindful Vandalism: A Conversation with Hew Locke

by Elizabeth Fullerton



Armada (detail),
2019.
Mixed media, approx.
45 boat sculptures,
34–162 cm. long.



Hew Locke is a self-confessed “maximalist.” His sculptures, installations, drawings, and photographs overflow with miscellanea, their materials ranging from plastic toys and beads to brass etchings and golden filigree. This physical profusion mirrors an abundance of thematic references—voodoo, slavery, migration, colonialism, globalization, media voyeurism, and corporate greed, to name a few. Cliché and legend, ritual and religion, past and present collide in a heady mishmash. Locke is perhaps best known for his teeming reliefs of Queen Elizabeth II, recognizable only by her iconic silhouette. In recent years, he has turned to ready-made porcelain busts of royal figures, lavishly decorated with military insignia, jewelry, foliage, fake hair, and skulls.

For Locke, who was born in Scotland and spent his formative years in Guyana (a British colony until 1970), the British monarchy has been a lifelong obsession.

An avid historian, he is interested in its source of power, its symbols, and how it influences questions of nationhood and identity. Another strand of his practice revolves around boats—he sailed between the U.K. and South America during his childhood. His early single boat sculptures have since evolved into magnificent

suspended flotillas packed with meaning. Amid the divisive climate of Brexit, accompanied by worldwide calls for racial justice, Locke’s multifarious works—including the “Patriots” series, which critically reimagines controversial U.S. statues, and a powerful public installation commemorating the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta—have taken on added resonance.

Elizabeth Fullerton:
Let’s begin with the boats, which are central to your practice.

Hew Locke: I’ve been making boats since 1987.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Hew Locke.

For Those in Peril on the Sea,
2011.
Mixed media, approx.
70 boat sculptures.
View of installation at
the Pérez Art
Museum, Miami.



The first was a boat to take the souls of dead slaves back to Africa. For years, I was embarrassed about it, but now I’m not. Every year after that I would make a boat. It became a necessity. That’s to do with growing up in Guyana, where to travel any distance you got on a small boat because the country has many rivers and waterways. I came to Guyana on a boat and returned briefly to Scotland by boat when my father was doing a scholarship. It was a boat bringing post-Windrush-generation migrants to Britain. Several years ago, I would make pieces of a work and the shape would emerge, and I’d realize, “Ah it’s become a boat again.”

EF: Is it true that the progression from single sculptures to flotillas—including warships, clippers, whalers, trawlers, fishing boats, rafts, and dhows—was prompted by your discovery of votive boats in a fishermen’s chapel in Portugal?

HL: Yes, I started noticing them in cathedrals on the continent after that, where, for example, they might have been donated by a captain or crew in thanks for surviving a storm or a wreck. When I was asked to take part in the Folkestone Triennial, it took about a year and a half of discussions with the local diocese to get permission to show *For Those in Peril on the Sea* (2011) in St Mary and St Eanswythe’s Church, the oldest building in Folkestone. I was banking on it being ok, but it was a lot more than just ok. People got married underneath it. It became a local thing. When it traveled to the Pérez Art Museum in Miami, it fit right in because everybody is a migrant and people could relate directly to it. The version in the Ikon show last year was about the political situation. The title *Armada* is double-edged, meaning simply “fleet” in Spanish and Portuguese, but it also refers to the idea of invasion.





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EF: The earlier installations were suspended above people's heads, whereas *Armada* hangs at eye level.

HL: There's a simple reason for that. In Folkestone, they were bigger and there wasn't much cargo, there wasn't much going on inside. The newer ones are so detailed that it's important for people to look at them. The boats are a bit smaller, but you get drawn into their world. If you're at the level of the hull, it feels as if they're moving. When there's a large group of boats, I'm always asking them, "Where are you going?" It's like humanity on the move.

EF: You've talked about striving for a "broken beauty" in these slightly decrepit boats and other works.

HL: I've always felt that I have to sneak up on beauty. If I'm making something, I'm aware of the contrast between the subject matter and the beauty of the objects. At times there's a perverseness, which I quite like. I'm interested in things falling apart. That again comes from growing up in Guyana and watching things literally decay because of the tropical climate.

EF: In 2015, you were invited to create a major intervention aboard the *HMS Belfast*, a warship-turned-tourist-attraction permanently docked in the River Thames. You bestowed ornate masks on the 1970s sailor mannequins positioned around the ship doing different tasks. What was the underlying concept?

HL: I'd seen a video by two Americans traveling around Britain who said HMS *Belfast* was "probably one of the creepiest places in Britain," referring to the mannequins. The ship's final journey was to see off Jamaican independence in 1962, an act of benign gunboat diplomacy, and then it went to Trinidad after Carnival; but in my imagination, they arrived in time for Carnival and they're preparing for that. I realized that all you needed to do to change the narrative of the boat was to put masks on the mannequins. One of the characters is the sail maker. He's surrounded by Carnival memorabilia, and his room became the center of operations.

EF: *The Tourists* provoked controversy and was closed down six weeks early, although it lives on as a video installation. What prompted the furor?

HL: I was talking about the complex nature of the hero, heroism, patriotism, and the idea that these guys are one second from death. So it was about their internal dialogue, but also about the morally problematic *Madame Butterfly* idea of a girl in every port, and I had Calypso songs playing throughout. But people thought it was very, very scary and were offended. There were notes on Tripadvisor saying, "Don't visit this ship." There was a very angry article in *The Times* with the subtext, "How dare this foreigner interfere with our holy relic?" The ship is a museum, but it's a living icon as well; people get their ashes scattered off it. I still look back and think it was a great piece of work that took over the whole place. It wasn't understood.

EF: You've also tackled another national icon, Queen Elizabeth, whose image you graffitied on your school notebooks. Your feelings about her were far from clear-cut.

HL: It took a while for me to feel ok about doing images of the Queen because it felt really sacrilegious. I kept trying to tell people, "This is not satire, it's not a joke. This is quite a serious attempt to address ideas of na-

tional identity and who we choose as our figurehead." Every so often I'll do an image of the Queen; I've got a drawer full of them.

EF: Still?

HL: Oh God, yes. Every two months or so, because it's part of what I do. But I'm painting images of the Queen from a long time ago, not from now. Maybe it's to do with my childhood, growing up with these images.

EF: Your Parian ware royal busts are a new development, quite different from your reliefs of Queen Elizabeth.

HL: The thing about them is they are real objects with a history. So, they have a different conceptual starting point, which I find interesting. It started with an instinctual purchase I made of a young Queen Victoria, which had been bought as a souvenir by a visitor to the Crystal Palace Great Exhibition in 1851. These are things that the middle and lower-middle classes would have on the mantelpiece. It was a cheap way of replicating ideas of the Grand Tour—you can't afford a marble bust, but instead, here's mass-produced Parian ware, unfired, unglazed porcelain. I kept thinking of Andy Warhol as I was working; I couldn't not think about him.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE:
The Tourists,
2015.

Two views of mixed-media intervention in 27 cabins throughout the museum-ship HMS *Belfast*, London.





THIS PAGE:
Black Queen,
2005.

Mixed media, including
plastic, fabric,
wood, and screws,
290 x 160 x 60 cm.

OPPOSITE:
El Dorado,
2005.

Mixed media, including
plastic, fabric, wood,
and screws,
290 x 175 x 60 cm.

EF: What inspired your bust version of Queen Victoria?

HL: I haven't been able to bring myself to watch the period drama *The Young Victoria* yet, but there's a whole romanticizing of British history, and I tie it in with the B word (Brexit), with ideas of national identity, and "We don't need anybody, we once had an empire." Victoria's been smoothed out, all her crinkles removed, and I'm thinking, "Right, but this woman was a problem. In her time, this and this happened in her name." I'm trying to comment on that romantic idea of British history. The statue is covered in badges from British regiments, some of which have a positive history from the First or Second World War, but they might also have a much more problematic earlier history. They might have fought in an Ashanti War or a war in the Caribbean, which was about grabbing territory and property, the property being slaves.

EF: Who are some of the other royals featured in the "Souvenirs" series (2019–ongoing)?

HL: There's a bust of Prince Albert Edward, Victoria's oldest son. It wasn't working until we put on fake hair styled in what's called Senegal Twist. All of a sudden he went from being ordinary to a weird Victorian operetta kind of star with a fake wig. The other half of the pair, his wife, Princess Alexandra of Denmark, has a Benin bronze ivory mask and skulls. It's turning them from a fetishistic object into even more of a fetish object.

EF: Your drawings are packed with detail, and your sculptures overflow their boundaries. Excess is an underlying element of your practice: it's both irreverent and exuberant.

HL: Oh yes, this is not miserable. That's very important. It was a reaction to what I saw as a particular type of British politeness. It's something that can't be contained, it's dripping all over the place, coming out at the seams. Back in the late '90s, I stopped using color for several years because people would say, "Where do you come from, what festival are you making this for?" I realized that the reading of my colorful sculptures was being determined by my accent and background, so I made lots of black and white works, monochrome drawings, monochrome cardboard sculptures, and it worked. People could take that seriously.

EF: How did you come back from that position?

HL: I was in the studio and thought, "Right, I want to



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make a fake voodoo doll.” So, I started making a plastic doll and from that came a whole line of fake exotica, presenting people with the thing that they have issues with: “Ok, you want exotica, I’m going to give you the most exotic, most exuberant thing I can come up with.” From that came the voodoo royal family. I returned to color by using actual objects, not making things and painting them bright colors, but using the stuff of exotica, like colorful plastic and silk flowers, which in and of itself was trying to be exotic.

EF: *The Nameless* (2010), another example of excess in your work, is a monumental collaged frieze of beads and cord. Myriad civilizations and mythologies come together in a lively and macabre dance that includes a winged horseman of the Apocalypse, the lion of St. Mark in Venice, and a flute player sporting Kalashnikovs and a Benin mask.

HL: The lion comes from my many visits to Venice—I’m trying not to self-censor. A Kalashnikov is a cliché of global conflict, and the Benin mask is again a cliché of African culture. I’ve come round to the view that just because something’s a cliché doesn’t mean it’s not a good thing. The clichés of gunmen are generic, without identity. I wanted to do something that had no specific political or national comment but was just made up of images from my stream of consciousness. The imagery is like a dream, it’s a procession but without beginning or end.

EF: Why do the beads drip downwards as if subject to gravity?

HL: The dripping is not to do with paint. I always saw these as tapestries. My wife, Indra, got me into tapestries at the V&A. The worn-out tapestries would have broken threads hanging down, and that’s what this became. It’s about broken beauty again, about things falling apart.

EF: Your predilection for excess may soon be given free rein on a public statue of Queen Victoria in Birmingham.

HL: Yes, I’m proposing to build a wooden boat around her as if the piece is being shipped out of Birmingham. And around Victoria will be small versions of her. It’s about the fact that such statues were often produced in multiples and sent around the Commonwealth. Birmingham’s make-up today is linked to that statue and that particular history—its large Asian community is because of, or despite, that.



FROM OPPOSITE:

Souvenir 8
(Albert Edward,
Prince of Wales),
2019.

Mixed media on antique
Parian ware,
53 x 31 x 32 cm.

The Nameless (detail),
2010.

Plastic beads, cord, glue
gun, and gaffer tape,
dimensions variable.

EF: Do you plan to decorate Victoria herself?

HL: Yes, I'm going to give her a golden mask, it's a bit Tutankhamun. It's making it into a sort of votive object. People walk past public statues every day, they take them for granted and don't see them really. I'm trying to make the past visible.

EF: You've used the phrase "mindful vandalism" to describe your practice of decorating photographs of public statues (of ethically questionable figures) by painting them and encrusting them with filigree, jewelry, and badges. Have you ever had permission to dress an actual statue?



HL: No, this is the furthest I've got with it. We're really pushing for it to happen. I started working with the idea of what I call "impossible proposals" back in 2003. My first show with P.P.O.W Gallery in 2018 focused on statues and the debate in New York about what to get rid of. I did a statue of Peter Stuyvesant, the last Dutch governor of New York, who was virulently anti-Semitic. I did another of Columbus, who is important to the Italian American community but for Native Americans and African Americans not such a good guy. I put beads and pre-Columbian objects on top, messing with history and presenting him as a kind of Aztec high priest.

EF: A distinctive feature of these photographs is the intricate metal etchings adorning them.

HL: Those are drawn, scanned, and then sent to a company that produces them as brass etchings. This type of drawing goes into other areas of my practice as well, including the boats and bead pieces. There's a massive crossover with everything I do. For the George Washington statue outside Federal Hall in downtown New York, I did a decorative waistcoat with slaves hanging off in etched metal. J. Marion Sims, the one statue that did get moved—to the cemetery where he was buried—is covered with imagery related to the fact that he was the father of gynecology but made his name experimenting on female slaves.

EF: Though these proposals were probably too contentious to be realized, in 2015, you completed a high-profile public work. *The Jurors* commemorates the sealing of the Magna Carta. What was its genesis?

HL: The Magna Carta marks the beginning of trial by jury, among other things, so the idea was to have 12 bronze chairs, for 12 members of the jury, around an imaginary table in the field of Runnymede, where the document was sealed. They're very simple chairs, but their backs are decorated on both sides with scenes of historical events, people, and symbolic representations of justice from around the world. On the back of one chair is an image of a cell door from Nelson Mandela's prison. Another is to do with the British slave ship *Zong*, based on a court case in which the owners tried to claim insurance after they threw the slaves overboard. Yet another shows a hollow baobab prison tree in the middle of the Australian bush where Aboriginal people were kept when they were caught. I wanted to involve a wide range of cultures. It's not just some-



thing to look at and admire, you sit down on these chairs and have discussions about ideas of justice.

EF: You also included the megaphone of gay rights activist Harvey Milk, the suffragette Lillian Lenton, and a mythical creature that stands outside law schools in China. What were the criteria for inclusion?

HL: It was a moral minefield. The research, done by my wife, Indra Khanna, was intense. There was a shortlist, and then we'd find, "Oh no, we can't use her, she said that." We put in Burmese politician Aung San Suu Kyi because at the time she was a heroine. The whole point was that it's not a collection of heroes; it's a collection of people who are significant in ideas of justice and the struggle for justice.

EF: How involved were you in the fabrication process?

HL: I'd get the image back from the fabricators modeled in Plastiline and add flowers, stars, keys, and other

symbols in the same material, scratch in writing or patterns, remodel sections, and slowly but surely bring it to life. I would rework it again at the wax stage before it was cast in bronze. The flowers represent different ideas of justice in the Victorian language of flowers.

EF: Every country should have one of these monuments to inspire peace.

HL: The proposal was to have it sited around the world, starting with one in Runnymede and one outside the U.S. Supreme Court. One of the biggest groups to see *The Jurors* at its opening was a group of about 300 American lawyers because the U.S. Constitution is very influenced by the Magna Carta. I'd also like to have it in India and South Africa.

"Here's the Thing," a major exhibition of Locke's work at Colby College Museum of Art, is on view through November 2020. ■■

FROM OPPOSITE:
Marion Sims, Central Park, from the "Patriots" series, 2018.

Mixed media, including brass, fabric, beads, coins, and shells on aluminum-mounted C-type photograph, 122 x 183 x 6 cm.

The Jurors, 2015.

Bronze, 12 chairs, 123 cm. high each. View of permanent installation in Runnymede, London, U.K.