Exhibition catalogues

Ideas of ornament and excess are reassessed in this major survey of Hew Locke's work

Hew Locke: Passages
Edited by Martina Droth and Allie Biswas, with contributions by Kelly Baum, Indie A. Choudhury, Hew Locke, Saloni Mathur, Asma Naeem, Rachel Stratton and Clarrie Wallis. 304 pp. incl. 226 col. ills. (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven and London, 2025), $75. ISBN 978–0–30028–468–3.

by **LEON WAINWRIGHT**

This catalogue surveys three decades of work in drawing, sculpture, assemblage and large-scale installation by Hew Locke (b.1959), offering the most comprehensive account of his practice to date. Throughout his career, Locke has returned to the pageantry and detritus of empire: coats of arms, royal portraiture, naval power, shipping, commodity, extraction and the stubborn afterlife of public monuments. The volume balances interpretative framing with an unusually generous visual and documentary apparatus. Martina Droth's opening essay establishes the core argument, followed by Saloni Mathur's 'Hew Locke's imaginary acts', a companion piece more explicitly orientated towards postcolonial time and historical imagination. Allie Biswas's interview with Locke places the artist's voice alongside these curatorial readings, and a long plates section, organised by bodies of work, provides short entries and contextual notes. These sections are completed by a chronology, a checklist of works shown in *Passages* at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven (closed 11th January 2026), and a bibliography.

The book's interpretative premise is announced early and kept in view. Locke's work has often been described along two axes: its 'aesthetic of excess' (p.11) and the artist's diasporic identity as Guyanese British. Droth identifies a recurring habit in which the latter is used to explain the former – a manoeuvre that 'skips over the object and immediately resorts to biography' (p.11). The danger, she argues, is not simply that biography is reductive, but that 'excess' becomes a floating label – variously tropical, baroque, carnivalesque and exotic – that mistakes visual density for cultural essence. The book's most valuable critical intervention is to refuse the idea that profusion in

1. *Foreign exchange*, by Hew Locke. 2022. Steel, fibreglass, wood, resin and acrylic paint, 728 by 435 by 435 cm. (Commissioned by Ikon Gallery, Birmingham; photograph Shaun Fellows).

2. *Hemmed in two,* by Hew Locke. 2000. Cardboard, acrylic paint, marker, found objects, wood, rope and papier mâché, dimensions variable. (Photograph FXP Photography).

Locke's work amounts to decorative surplus or stylistic signature. Instead, it makes a case for ornament as method: structural, historical and materially coercive. Droth's account insists that ornament is 'the crux of the work itself: both figure and ground [. . .] like a growth that cannot be separated from its carrier' (p.11), as well as a thread that unites Locke's diverse projects. This shifts attention away from what the work signifies to how it acts on a viewer through scale, repetition, attachment, shimmer, obstruction and lure. As the plates section repeatedly demonstrates, Locke's practice is best grasped through motifs that migrate alongside his chosen materials and procedures: a costume becomes a prop; a prop becomes a figure; a figure becomes an emblem; and an emblem returns as a fragment, repurposed within another work.

Locke's early installations provide a crucial anchor for this argument, and the catalogue usefully reconstructs them within the chronology and plate entries. Locke's cardboard constructions began with *Hemmed in* (1999), a large-scale installation first made for a group exhibition at the Brunei Gallery at SOAS University of London. It was then reworked into *Hemmed in two* (Fig.2), produced on site for the entrance hall of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The installation was 'forcefully jammed' between the monumental columns as a perforated (p.52), boat-like structure that also evokes a palatial building or a sprawling parcel, inscribed with barcodes related to objects in the museum's collection. Cardboard appeared here not as a neutral medium but as a charged material – both 'purposeful and disposable' – the fragility of which intensifies the sense of compression and threat (p.52). In other words, excess began not as ornamental embellishment but as a physical pressure: a sculpture too large for its allotted architecture, which seems to chafe against institutional containment.

From here, the catalogue develops its second major claim: that the force of ornament, as Locke wields it, is inseparable from the symbolic machinery of empire. Ornament is described as a 'language of imperialism' that authorised the acquisition of land (p.11), resources and bodies by providing an aesthetic imprimatur for power. The catalogue is particularly adept at showing how Locke handles this paradox. The 'highest forms of cultural ornament' have often functioned to mask brutality with splendour (p.11), and his work reactivates that masking in order to make critique possible. Importantly, critique here is not iconoclastic erasure. Locke does not simply strip away imperial symbols; he multiplies, burdens and dresses them to the point where their authority becomes absurd and unstable. Saturation becomes a method for revealing the theatricality of power.

Nowhere is this more legible than in the works that stage monarchy and monumentality, such as *Foreign exchange* (Fig.1). Commissioned by Ikon Gallery for the Birmingham 2022 Festival and coinciding with the Commonwealth Games, *Foreign exchange* was installed around a statue of Queen Victoria erected in the city in 1901. Locke constructed

a large boat that appeared to carry the queen and added five smaller fibreglass replicas of her statue, each with a patina resembling weathered bronze. These imitations were modified with warrior-like headdresses and shields based on medals commemorating colonial wars, including the capture of Trinidad (1797), the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–80) and the conquest of Benin (1897). The installation left the original statue physically untouched; it was dismantled in August 2022 and the smaller figures were donated to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. This approach of 'statue-dressing' (p.150) – as opposed to defacing or toppling – clarifies Locke's preference for indirect intervention at a time when monuments are often contested through removal, restitution and direct action (Fig.3).

The discussion of *Foreign exchange* also demonstrates that Locke's maritime motifs are not only metaphors of migration but also explicit reminders of imperial logistics: the boat as a vehicle for the transport and transfer of statues, commodities and sovereignty itself. This is expanded in the section on flotillas, the origins of which are traced to Locke's Folkestone Triennial commission, *For those in peril on the sea* (2011). The work comprised approximately seventy wooden and cardboard boats of varying sizes, combining model vessels with the artist's own cardboard forms. It was suspended in the nave of St Mary and St Eanswythe. The entry notes that the work draws on the artist's childhood voyage from Guyana to England and his memory of stowaways discovered on board. Later projects extend the flotilla logic into literary and historical allusion: *Wine dark sea* (2016) evokes Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990). It also maintains a recurring feature of Locke's boats: human presence is suggested only through clothing and cargo, leaving crews and passengers to the imagination. *Armada* (2017–19; Tate) is described as a group of 'meticulously wrecked' boats with blown-apart sails (p.191), reading apocalypse not as spectacle but as an intensification of the maritime archive of disaster.

3. *Columbus, Central Park* from the series *Patriots*, by Hew Locke. 2018. Chromogenic print and mixed media, 182.9 by 121.9 cm. (Private collection; courtesy the artist).

Such descriptions are significant not merely as context but because they help specify what excess achieves in Locke's practice. The flotillas are not 'busy' in the sense of containing too many symbols; instead, they create fields of attention that suggest an atmosphere of threat and vulnerability. The boat is at once container and fragment, a means of passage and a sign of precarity. In this respect, the catalogue's emphasis on ornament sometimes risks narrowing the phenomenology of the work – its spatial and bodily effects – by continually re-suturing those effects to signification. Yet it also offers tools to resist this tendency. As Droth observes, Locke urges a shift away from 'the catalyzing event' towards, in his words, 'the actual phenomenon itself' (p.12), a phrasing that positions excess not as semiotic overload but as a demand made on perception: an accumulation that compels attention before it resolves into message. This is also where the volume sits in productive tension with a longer debate about art in diaspora cultures. Models of 'art-as-media' have encouraged interpretative approaches in which visual perception is treated as a form of reading, and works of art as texts that mediate identities, histories and politics. Such methods can become complicit in flattening out the aesthetic field. By contrast, embracing the phenomenal may prevent works from being reduced to meaning alone.[1] In Locke's work profusion is less a code to be deciphered than a texture that presses on the body, through sustained attention to scale, volume, rhythm, weight, noise and stillness.

The comprehensive entry on *Tourists* (2015) makes this especially clear and provides background material that is probably unfamiliar to many readers. In March 2015 Locke made a temporary intervention aboard HMS *Belfast* in which he used mannequins to restage scenes of daily life for a crew of nearly one thousand. Locke reimagined the ship's history by dressing the mannequins in elaborate costumes, painting skull tattoos onto them and covering their faces with horned masks. The work proposed a counterfactual narrative anchored in a historical detail. On its last journey the *Belfast* passed through Trinidad in August 1962, but Locke imagined the sailors arriving earlier, in February, in time for Carnival. The sailors appear as a Mas (masquerade) band 'touring around the world [. . .] flying the flag for the British Empire – or the dwindling British Empire' (p.194). The catalogue also notes the controversy the work provoked, as some visitors interpreted it as an act of disrespect to British history, despite the artist's insistence that it sought a 'complex [. . .] altered reality' in which imperial representatives remain 'human beings with their own hopes, dreams, and fears' (p.194). Here excess is not only a matter of costume and surface; it is an ethical and perceptual strategy. The horned masks and skull tattoos do not simply symbolise death, they complicate the viewer's relationship to military display by making the

mannequins less legible as didactic props. The museum ship, usually an artefact for controlled historical instruction, becomes a stage for an unstable mixture of festivity and threat.

Locke's 2022 Tate Britain Commission, *Procession* (Fig.4), can be read as a culmination of these procedures. Consisting of nearly 150 life-size sculptural figures that occupied the full length of the Duveen Galleries of Tate Britain, London, it is described as a multigenerational group – dancers, drummers, labourers and soldiers – gathered in 'celebration and protest', their movement 'open ended, as much an act of worship as an attempt to break free' (p.237). In her catalogue entry Clarrie Wallis adds useful institutional and spatial context, identifying the Duveen Galleries as Tate Britain's 'spine', designed to rival the sculpture court of the British Museum, London. Launched in 2000, the Duveen commission is meant to provide major visibility and resources to artists poised for a breakthrough. Wallis also foregrounds the museum's material entanglements – most notably Henry Tate's wealth from the sugar trade – and positions *Procession* as a work that probes British history, colonialism and the symbols of monarchy and power bound up in that institutional legacy.

The affective dimension of *Procession*, as the catalogue acknowledges, is not stable: it ranges 'from glee to grief', resisting 'simple jubilation' (p.24). Indeed, the volume's few weaker moments occur when such ambivalence is replaced by moral closure. Droth's assertion that 'nothing [. . .] can stand in the way of movement, migration, and cultural change' (p.25), for example, risks producing the semblance of resolution out of the book's careful attention to violence and inequity. Similarly, the suggestion that Locke's work has 'anticipated and perhaps even inspired' fundamental shifts in museum practice is intriguing but difficult to sustain within the catalogue's own evidential frame (p.199). This is more than pedantic caution. It points to a broader temptation of translating critique into a reassuring story about institutional redemption. A more persuasive emphasis would be to keep the work's ambivalence in view while recognising museums as contested spaces capable of absorbing critique as display.

4. *Procession*, by Hew Locke. 2022. Cardboard, fabric, glue, PVA, plastic, fiberglass, wood, metal, resin and paint, dimensions variable. (Commissioned by Tate Britain, London; photograph Joe Humphrys).

A productive way to understand Locke's practice – precisely because it refuses easy redemption – is through time. The catalogue's attention to his 'implosion of unidimensional chronologies' aligns with a Caribbean critical tradition that treats temporality as a primary arena of power (p.199).[2] This has been central to the subtraction of the Caribbean from art history as a discipline, where charges of anachronism and belatedness – forms of temporal othering – have structured the reception of art and artists, patterns of exhibition-making and canonicity. Seen from this perspective, Locke's profusion is not merely a stylistic fact or a semiotic strategy of quoting imperial symbols. It is also a practice of time, a method for forcing simultaneity – monarchy and commodities, carnival and military discipline, memorial and protest, celebration and lament – into the same perceptual field. His works are not 'about time' in a merely thematic sense. They enact it as an atmosphere of overlap, of looping back and unsettling the uniformity of official histories and sequences – precisely the kind of temporal politics that Caribbean historiography has identified as a mechanism of imperial power and of the wilful disregard of artists with diaspora backgrounds.

What *Passages* offers, then, is a valuable reframing of excess as something more precise than a descriptive cliché. At its best, the catalogue shows excess as a historical drive and a strategic choice: ornament functioning as a kind of imperial script and as a way of making that script wobble under its own weight. It also supplies in-depth contextual accounts of major projects – especially *Tourists* and *Procession* – which will be essential for readers unfamiliar with Locke's work. The catalogue's most compelling critical implication is that Locke's ornament does not simply signify empire, it behaves like empire's afterlife: accretive, seductive, difficult to peel away and capable of turning institutional space into a field of contested perception. The volume is least convincing when it indicates that critique will necessarily yield progress, when the open-endedness and mixed affect it otherwise describes are recast as a teleology of change. Nonetheless, the larger achievement remains. It decisively shifts the discussion away from biography as an explanatory shortcut and towards the work's own formal and material logic, while leaving enough space for future commentary to push further on the phenomenal and temporal stakes of Locke's practice.

1 See L. Wainwright: *Phenomenal Difference: A Philosophy of Black British Art,* Liverpool 2017.
2 See L. Wainwright: *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean,* Manchester 2011.

Cantare il Medioevo: La lauda a Cortona tra devozione e identità civica / Singing the Middle Ages: The Lauda in Cortona Between Devotion and Civic Identity

Edited by Francesco Zimei and Simone Allegria. 184 pp. incl. numerous col. ills. (L'Erma di Bretschneider, Rome and Bristol VA, 2025), €80. ISBN 978–88–913–3534–0.

by **MIKHAIL LOPATIN**

This richly illustrated exhibition catalogue resulted from the convergence of different initiatives and events organised by LAUDARE, a major research project devoted to the Italian *lauda*, a poetic-musical genre popular from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries. Begun in 2022, the project is conducted by a large, interdisciplinary team of scholars led by Francesco Zimei and based at the University of Trento.[1] As part of their work, both an exhibition and a conference devoted to the early history of the *lauda* were held in Cortona in 2025.[2] They coincided with several important anniversaries for the city. Seven hundred years earlier the Casali family had assumed power there, retaining it until 1409. Moreover, the earliest surviving city statute (Archivio di Stato, Florence; cat. no.1), which laid down the norms for governing Cortona and marked its transition from communal to seigneurial rule, dates to 1325. Finally, 2025 marked the eighth centenary of the composition of the *Canticle of the Sun* by St Francis (d.1226), the best-known example of a *lauda*.

The exhibition and its catalogue present and discuss more than twenty objects. Many were drawn from institutions in Cortona, but they also included loans from Florence, Siena, Arezzo and Milan. Most were manuscripts, but there was also a chalice (no.4; Fig.5) made for Francesco Casali, bearing his arms, and later donated by him to S. Margherita, Cortona, as well as an over life-size panel painting depicting Margaret (no.20; Fig.7), a native saint who was canonised in 1728. The aim of the exhibition was to shed new light on both the medieval history of Cortona and the tradition of singing *laude*, the origins of which are closely linked to the city.

5. Chalice, by Michele di Tommè. Copper, silver and gilded silver, 20 by 27 cm. (Museo Diocesano di Cortona).