

HEW LOCKE

A new exhibition of work by the Scottish artist Hew Locke floats Rachel Campbell-Johnston's boat, *The Times*, 15 March 2019, p. 12

visual art



# I saw 50 ships come sailing in

**A new exhibition of work by the Scottish artist Hew Locke floats Rachel Campbell-Johnston's boat**

It's hard not to take note. Over the course of the past decade the work of Hew Locke has been popping up with increasing insistency: in group shows, as a candidate for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square; at the heart of Magna Carta's 800th-

anniversary celebrations, in the middle of Central Park in New York. Even at the Venice Biennale, that most savagely competitive of visual arenas, Locke managed to bring gossiping biennale-goers to a halt with a flotilla of suspended model boats.

A version of this last work provides the grand finale

for Locke's most comprehensive exhibition to date. A fleet of assorted vessels hang in mid-air amid the light-flooded Victorian gothic spaces of the Ikon gallery in Birmingham. They might almost have entered through the arch of the window behind them and be leaving through the one that lies ahead.

Who is on board? What cargo do they carry? Why are they together? No answers are offered. However, as you wander amid the 50-odd vessels that make up this ragtag armada you will discover details that strike. Here is a model of the three-masted

*Mayflower*. There is a souvenir of HMT *Empire Windrush*. Here is a replica of a modern lifeboat. There is a raft of the sort that a refugee might build. A Spanish galleon surges alongside a rusting oil tanker. A 19th-century slaver is part of the same fleet as a pleasure-cruising gin palace.

A boat is not just a boat for Locke. He was born in Edinburgh in 1959, the son of an immigrant Guyanese father who took him back to Guyana (by boat) when he was five. Locke remained there, in Georgetown, the low-lying (and frequently flooded) capital of a Commonwealth outpost, until he was 20, when he returned to Britain to study at Falmouth School of Art. He brings the weight of his memories to bear on the images that he creates. "So many things, good and bad, travel by sea," he says. His vessels are freighted with history, with political meanings and personal memories,

with poetic imagining and sceptical commentaries. An armada that first strikes the spectator as simply beautiful gradually invades the mind of all those who look. Locke's pieces tend to work this way. He catches the eye, then he reels you in. This exhibition is called *Here's the Thing*. He likes

ambiguous titles. This one is apparently taken from a phrase he uses a lot when he's trying to talk about or explain his work — which, of course, is "the thing" he has made. The curators have set out to illustrate Locke's range. The exhibition encompasses adapted photographs,



Top: installation view of *Here's the Thing* by Hew Locke, left. Above: Chinese Imperial Gold Loan 13

## A Spanish galleon surges alongside a rusting oil tanker

**Hew Locke: *Here's the Thing* is at Ikon in Birmingham (0121 248 0708) to June 2**

collages, sculptures and installations. One of the highlights is a fantastical "drawing", created from lengths of black cord and jet beads, that sends a carnivalesque procession of strange creatures cavorting around the walls of an entire gallery. This pared-down modern take on the traditional tapestry, with its drum-thumping monsters and its skeletal dancers, its Kalashnikov-wielding soldiers and its tambourine-clanging freaks, elides the macabre language of contemporary Caribbean voodoo culture with the medieval tradition of the dance of death.

Locke again draws on his cultural roots, on his childhood experiences of the clapped-out legacy of empire and of the emergence of new nations from its crumbled edifice. Moving to Guyana in the mid-1960s, he has explained, he arrived just in time to witness the birth of its independence. He watched a new nation growing up, forging its identity with such emblems as anthem and flag. It is this concept of nationhood that fascinates him. The weirdly exotic and the safely recognisable, the stolidly establishment and the downright bizarre meet, clash and merge as he invites us to ponder what Britishness can mean in a global society in which emerging and developing cultures can keep reinventing themselves.

This is a many-layered vision, literally in the case of his signature sculptures, several

of which are included in this show. Look at his portrait of the Queen, for example. Guyana is the only Latin American country in which English is the official language. It is part of the Commonwealth and the Queen is its monarch. Yet it is an at once immediately recognisable yet utterly strange representation of her that he creates. Gaudily colourful, encrusted with layer upon layer of twinkling beads and glittery trinkets, festooned with gold chains and pearl swags, it instantly attracts, but peer closer. Amid the garish plastic flowers and the tropical palm leaves you will see the striped legs of a spider stirring. A lizard turns out to be a dinosaur. A skull lurks amid silvery bobbles. A jaguar prowls through beads of ruby red.

Locke looks at our perceptions of monarchy as they have spanned the centuries from the famous Ditchley portrait of Elizabeth I, that stiff dolly straddling the globe with her tiny white satin shoes, to the Princess Diana shrines heaped with flowers wrapped in plastic and sentimental teddy bears. It is a strange fetishistic image that he conjures up: part icon of British culture, part primitive statue of some pagan god, part collage created by an overenthusiastic five-year-old.

It's never quite one thing or the other; neither beautiful nor ugly; neither good nor bad. Our world, Locke insists, is far more nuanced. The longer you look, the more subtly complicated, the more uneasily ambivalent it all comes to seem.

**Souvenir 5 (Albert Edward, Prince of Wales), 2019**

