The Telegraph

HEW LOCKE

Cal Revely-Calder, The Procession is a bravura picture of colonial history in a building built on sugar, The Telegraph, 21 March 2022

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Installation image of Hew Locke's The Procession, Duveen Commission, Tate Britain, March 2022 – January 2023. Photo © Tate (Joe Humphries)

Empires have always made for tremendous theatre. "The paraphernalia of power," said the British-Guyanese sculptor Hew Locke, "its pomp and circumstance – that's my thing."

He was speaking today at Tate Britain, by his magnificent new work, The Procession, this year's commission for the Duveen Galleries. It's a long, exuberant throng, a parade of nearly 150 figures on the march. They're decked in gaudy hats and head-dresses, and swathes of cords and beads; they bear flags and totems aloft, and even in their stillness, they radiate motion, like dancers awaiting a beat. Some figures have faces turning surreal, blooming with petals, while others wear leering masks – or maybe their heads were born grotesque.

This carnival is a bravura picture of colonial history, but as is usual with Locke, it's less strident than imaginative. The Procession ranges over the iconography of slavery, from trimasted ships to corporate crests, and bright colour and dark history often zestily co-exist. One group of figures sport jazzy yellow cloaks, on which are snippets of vintage share-certificates for Nigeria Gold Mines and the Jamaica Trading Company.

These eerie spirits are compelling, in part, because the Duveen Galleries are so blank. Two long rectangular atria meet in an octagonal room to form a single 300-foot space, built in an undecorated stone that's best described, per a friend of mine, as "dusty beige". Phyllida Barlow, whose huge, messy sculptures were commissioned here in 2014, said the galleries' "loftiness" had an "authoritarian" edge, and this is true: in the West, neoclassicism is usually the sign that someone powerful but dull thinks their tastes have always been, and should remain, the norm.

Locke's commission, then, is an influx of euphoria, but it relates more subtly to the politics of the space. The procession is heading towards the entrance, a tall triumphal arch, on which is inscribed "These galleries were presented to the nation by Lord Duveen of Millbank". In the lead group, one black-robed walker holds a ceremonial staff aloft, on which a dancing skeleton – unbowed, animated and knowing whereof he speaks – holds a banner that reads "Sic transit gloria mundi" ("Thus passes the glory of the world").

Joseph Duveen was a prince among art dealers, in the Machiavellian sense. By creaming a fabulous

amount from the fabulously rich, he became able to fund these galleries, which opened in 1937. Wealthy philistines are not exceptional in British society, so Locke's skeleton is just having anti-aristocratic fun – even rich people, and their reputations, die – but The Procession more subtly haunts Henry Tate, who (the press release admits) was a "sugar-refining magnate".

Although neither Tate nor his company owned slaves, they must have imported raw sugar from either Caribbean states that used indentured labour, or the likes of Brazil, which retained slavery until 1888 – by which time Tate was so rich he was about to found the gallery in which Locke's figures stand.

The Procession is too smart to reduce itself to polemics here: being anticolonial in contemporary art is nothing without being interesting too. An earlier work by Locke, Churchill (2008), appears in the corner of one flag: an overcoloured photo of the statue in Parliament Square, it cheerfully layers Winston in bright, boxy patterns – which might be an anti-imperial move, but reads less like defacement than joyful embellishment. The Procession layers its history as it layers its textiles and jewellery: to complicate your understanding, to tease your interest. And while the show threatens to seem repetitive, especially at this scale, it rewards the isolation of any set of particulars.

In the most striking instance, one figure carries a giant flag on which is printed a photo of three sugarcane-cutters, but also a share certificate for the Black Star Line, the shipping company co-founded by the black activist Marcus Garvey, who wanted to return workers to Africa. The slavers' nightmare hasn't survived, but nor has Garvey's contentious dream, which divided anti-racist thinkers and still does today.

On that flag-carrier's clothes, meanwhile, are images of Brooks, the 18th-century slave ship whose 11 trips to Africa have become a byword for cruelty. These are pictures of unholy suffering, yet their effect, on publication in 1788, was to hasten the end of what they showed. By parading all these images together, in a building built on sugar, Locke reinvigorates the brutality of the past without simplifying its relation to the here-and-now. Pick at these thousands of details, it says, these obscure companies and curious symbols, and you'll learn about the fabric of history. Our collective past, shared between colonisers and colonised, is an endless procession – one in which the dead are far from gone.