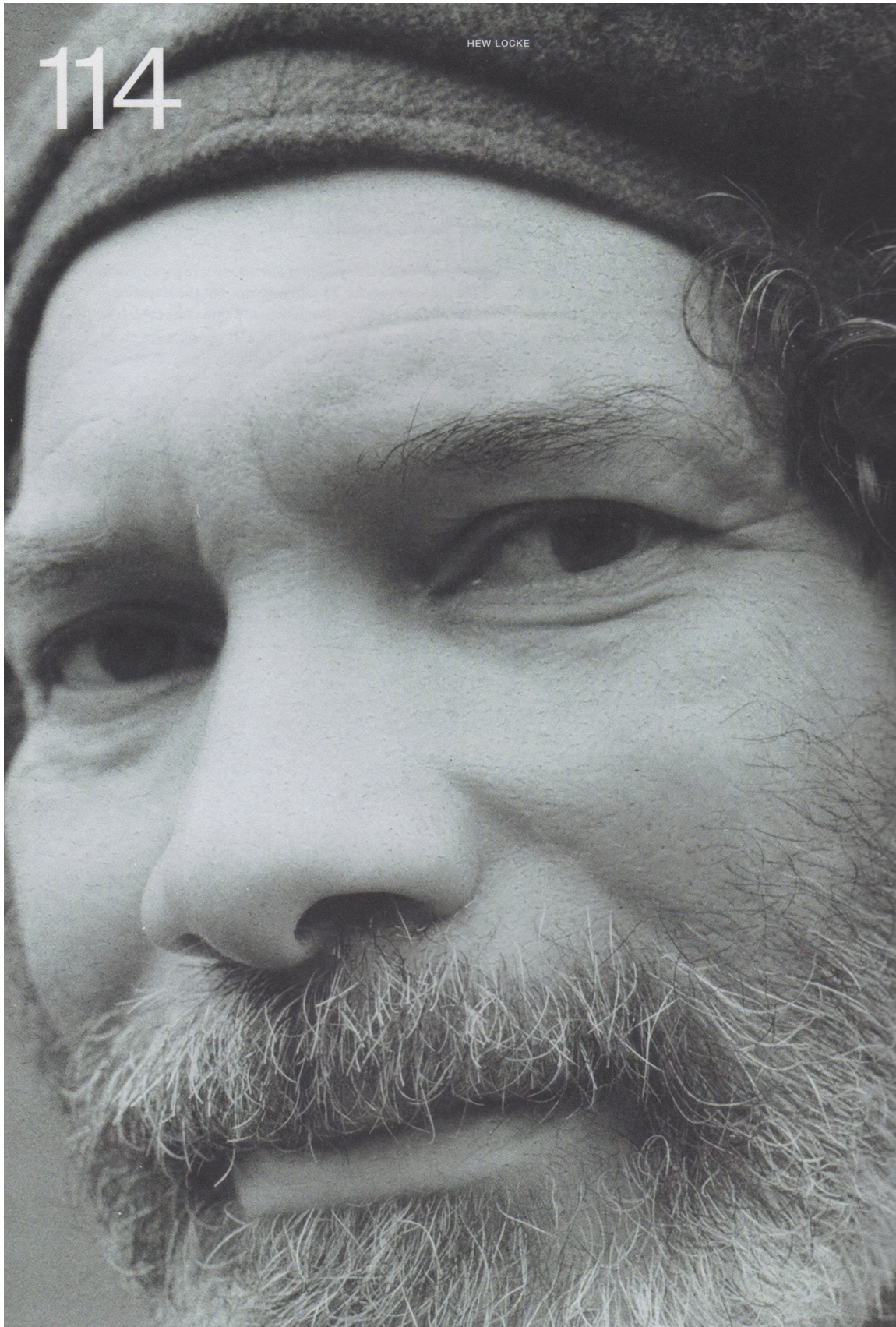


HEW LOCKE

The History Man, Precious Adesina, Elephant, Spring 2022





# The History Man

**“If I wasn’t an artist,  
I would’ve been a historian.  
I’m interested in power”**

**Hew Locke’s work challenges viewers to look and think again about the world that surrounds them. Precious Adesina discovers what fascinates him, and just what he is and is not prepared to talk about**





Previous spread: Hew Locke photographed by Jordan Afi Lambert in his studio in Camberwell, South London; above: *Colston*, from the series *Restoration*, 2006



At first, I'm taken aback by Locke's decision not to discuss his project for Tate Britain, especially since some of the new work is tantalisingly visible as we talk. But as he emphasises, he has four decades of work behind him. Locke is known for his large-scale architectural constructions, collages and cardboard constructions. He has had retrospectives both in the UK and US, and been included in countless international exhibitions. He was shortlisted for the Fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square and Prince William unveiled his sculpture *The Jurors* in 2015, commissioned to commemorate 800 years since the signing of Magna Carta.

"I take subject matter which I deem to be really boring, like images of the Royal family, and make it into something interesting," smiles Locke beneath his facemask (his studio, which consists of at least three assistants and his wife curator Indra Khanna, decided to continue wearing face coverings despite the relaxation of coronavirus rules in the UK). He notes that at the right time and in the right context these images become relevant. Since the late 1990s Locke has been working on an ongoing series called *House of Windsor*, depicting members of the Royal family, particularly the Queen. His piece *Black Queen* (2004) used plastic toys such as lizards and guns to create a bust of Queen Elizabeth akin to those found on pound coins and stamps. The barely discernible monarch looks out at the viewer in fear.

**"These statues are completely invisible, boring and uninteresting until somebody says 'Can we move this?'"**

As Hew Locke and I chat at his studio in Camberwell, South London, his team hurries around us in facemasks preparing his highly anticipated new piece for Tate Britain's annual Duveen Galleries commission. It will be available for the public to see from March 2022, but on this chilly October day five months earlier, it is hidden away in protective packaging, and Locke points out that we most definitely won't be talking about it.

"I know that's what you are here for, but I've done a lot of other things as well," the 62-year-old says with a smile. "If I talk about this piece specifically, then where's the element of surprise?" He does admit, though, that it will continue with his regular themes. "If I wasn't an artist, I would've been a historian," he says. "I'm interested in power, in who controls things, but also in looking at the past and how we interpret it today."

Tate Britain's cavernous Duveen Galleries sit at the heart of the building and in 1937 were the first public galleries in England designed specifically to display sculptures. In recent years, the 300ft long neoclassical space has boasted installations and performance pieces by artists such as Anthea Hamilton, Cerith Wyn Evans and Phyllida Barlow.

Locke is also known for photographing controversial patriotic statues, and then decorating the resulting images. He calls this "mindful vandalism". "It's something that's not going to get me chucked in jail," he laughs. Instead of defacing real-life statues with spray paint, he adorns pictures of them with garish regalia. "I'm interested in doing something which doesn't necessarily satisfy somebody who wants the thing gone but will certainly piss off somebody who wants it there, someone who thinks the past was glorious." In so doing, he hopes his proposals will illuminate the history of the statues that is often glossed over.

The outlandish decoration might just make people stop and think. "People are walking past the statues and aren't paying attention," he says. "What we discover is that these >









LEFT: COURTESY THE ARTIST; RIGHT: PHOTO: CHARLES LITTLEWOOD. COURTESY HALES GALLERY, LONDON

Left: *Burghers of Calais*, 2016; above: *Hinterland*, 2013









PHOTO: ANGIUS MILL, COURTESY: HALES GALLERY, LONDON

*Where Lies the Land?* 3, 2019



> things are completely invisible, boring and uninteresting until somebody says 'Can we move this?' Then all of a sudden it becomes a problem."

Naturally, our conversation moves to June 2020, when Black Lives Matter protesters in Bristol pulled down the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, stepped on it and tossed it into the harbour. When Locke heard of the incident, he was shocked. "I've gotten used to working and living within a particular system and sometimes you think 'this is how it is, things can't change'. And then [a statue] comes down in such a dramatic way." He lived in Bristol for a short period in the early 1990s. "A friend of mine reminded me that we were driving through Bristol and I pointed that specific statue out and said, 'He's got to go'. I'd forgotten that."

## "Artists are in boxes constantly trying to get out of the bloody things"

Locke believes that now the statue has been taken down, it should stay horizontal. Having been recovered by authorities from the harbour last year, it is currently on display at the M Shed Museum in the city (lying on its back) alongside placards from the protest. "It's important that he's not put upright in the museum," Locke explains, commending the fact the statue was thrown into the water. "Raising him upright means he gets his power back again." When down it's just a hollow piece of metal, "but when you put him up, he becomes a statement." He makes a gesture as if talking to the statue itself: "No, you ain't getting up again mate."

Another recurring theme in Locke's oeuvre, beyond questionable public figures past and present, is the presence of boats. "For my mental sanity, I need to make a boat sculpture every three years," he says, explaining that it reminds him of his upbringing. He was born in Edinburgh in 1959, but spent his formative years in Georgetown, Guyana from 1966 to 1980 before returning to the UK.

"I went to Guyana on a boat as a kid. I'm old enough to remember the days when flying was non-existent or just very expensive." He also notes that it's hard to get around once you're there. "Guyana means 'land of many waters'. To get anywhere, you have to go by ferry or a small boat. As a kid I would sit on the sea wall watching boats come and go." But he admits that the boats are more complicated than simply a look at his heritage. "They remind me of home, but they remind me of history such as the slave trade and

colonialism, but also the refugee situation in the Mediterranean," he says. Tate has just acquired a piece of Locke's called *Armada* (2019), a collection of boats suspended in the air by strings. "The title comes from that sort of fear of invasion, but 'armada' also doesn't always necessarily have all the same connotations as it does culturally over here: it can just mean flotilla."

As we both take a moment to sip our coffees, I realise that most of our conversation has been socio-political and ask him whether he minds that discussions about his work often go in that direction. "There are expectations in the art world that, when you come from the Caribbean, you do [a certain] type of work," he says. "Artists are in boxes constantly trying to get out of the bloody things."

He hates being pigeonholed. "People tie you to a certain art and that's so lazy and tiring," he explains. He wants to work on issues in countries beyond his own personal experience, and is worried by the tendency of the art world to place these expectations of national identity on artists.

Locke gestures for an example. What if he wanted to create a work that focused on Iran? "But then I realise that I'm not supposed to be doing that because that's the territory of artists from Iran," he says. "Although I'm not talking about jumping on somebody's else's culture, that's a different conversation." For Locke, it is the presupposition of his areas of interest that frustrates him: "You're supposed to reflect a certain thing."

Near the end of our conversation, the busy studio starts to quieten down as Locke's team leaves for lunch. I notice we've been speaking for a long time. Khanna, his wife and an important member of his studio, had asked me before the interview whether an hour and a half would be enough time for us. I politely agreed despite expecting to only need a fraction of that.

But Locke is a man who has not only done so much, but has a lot to say about it too, and the time flies by. Before I leave, I point back at the work carefully placed next to us, reconfirming whether it's part of the Duveen commission. He nods, but resolutely reiterates that he has nothing to offer me on the matter. It's the only thing he has no words for. At least not for now.

*Tate Britain Commission 2022: Hew Locke opens 22 March – 23 October 22. Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s-Now is at Tate Britain until 3 April*

*Precious Adesina is a freelance culture writer published in TIME, the Financial Times, the BBC, The Economist and The Art Newspaper. She has given talks at Whitechapel Gallery and Nottingham Contemporary on arts writing*





*Sikandar (maquette), 2010*