

How Do You Want Me?

Hew Locke is best known for his sculptures and installations, but in 2005 he started work in a medium new to him, photography, resulting in a spectacular gallery of studio portraits – *How Do You Want Me?*

His perennial themes of power, spin and national cultural identity are raised to a new intensity. The demonic central figure is a type of evil or threat to the State made flesh. He has conjured up a parade of inherently sinister figures - corrupt kings, generals, tyrants and bandits. All carrying regalia of State, they carefully present a constructed image of themselves to their public.

The work is a knitting-together of several strands of Locke's previous work, his *Menace to Society* sculptures; his re-presentations of civic statues in the Natives and Colonials series; and his drawings improvised from Velasquez and Goya portraits of the Spanish Royal family. He states

“I am literally putting myself inside my sculptures, inside a world of my own creating, I become my work. I am a Fetish, a Witch Doctor, a Royal Obeah-man. We live in a whirlwind of change and insecurity. The figures are born out of this chaos, and they often have a feeling of decay and perversion. You can feel the power of these characters, at the same time feel their impotence - like many tyrants, they contain the seeds of their own destruction.”



I think it is a useful to talk in more detail for an example about just one of the images from *How Do You Want Me?*

Tyger Tyger (above) is dressed in a uniform derived from the famous Red-coats of the British army during the Napoleonic Wars. A lifelong interest in history started during Locke's schooling in the Caribbean. “We learnt that if two people had a row in a room in Europe, a war was caused, and islands in the Caribbean changed hands. Guyana for instance has been a colony of France, Holland and England. If France sneezed, the Caribbean caught cold”.

The look of this character was also fuelled by images of the Black Jacobins such as Toussaint L'Overture (below, the leader of the slave revolution in Haiti which had its origins in the French Revolution), and by engravings of the heroes of the British Empire studied in old copies of *The London Illustrated News* in the local library.

Locke can also draw on the vast visual memory he has accumulated over many years studying or drawing weapons, uniforms and armour at institutions such as The Wallace Collection and The College of Arms in London, or The Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds.

More directly, this image was sparked off by two other artworks.

Tipu's Tiger (c.1790, illustrated next page) is a painted wooden organ shaped like a tiger, which when wound up growls as it devours a wailing, struggling British Red-coat.



Tipu Sultan, The Tiger of Mysore, was the last of the Indian kings to resist British domination. His tiger-shaped throne was topped by a life-size tiger's head of solid gold. He is said to have passed hours happily in his music-room with an attendant turning the handle of the organ. After his final defeat the automata was presented to the museum of the East India Company by the army, ultimately finding its way to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.



Sharpe's Tiger by Bernard Cornwell was one of the 'talking books' Locke often listens to while working in his studio. The popular Sharpe series of novels follow the adventures of the eponymous British officer during the campaign against Tipu Sultan in India and Napoleon in the Peninsular War. These were adapted for a sun-drenched television series in the 1990's, which revelled in the colourful uniforms, heraldry and banners of the rival armies and battalions.

"In the TV series, Sharpe and his men represent a brand of 'away the lads Eng-er-land' patriotism. He is like the leader of a football gang – 'let's get those French bastards'. In the original novel, the portrayal of the Indians is much more racist. This book accurately translated to TV would not go down well with the British Asian TV audience at all".



Tyger wears his trophies of war – self-awarded medals and babies' heads, (which allude to shrunken heads or scalps). They are a reminder of how many have been killed to propel him to this point of power. The patterned backdrop he has chosen is a cheap fabric – a pirated Versace design based on heraldic imagery. He clutches his staff of office, topped by his own heraldic device. The fruits apparent in many of these images perform the same function as the skulls that feature in much of Locke's other works. They are a Vanitas, a reminder that all things must pass, that we shall all die, and that power is fleeting.

'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' asked William Blake (*Tyger Tyger*, 1794). A desire to create Beauty is a constant impetus behind all of Locke's work, and the final arbitrator in his aesthetic decisions. Each piece of fabric or object collaged onto the created costumes is considered in the same way as an individual brush stroke of colour on a painting. The original costume, in this case a Red-coat, acts as the starting point – the under-painting in effect - which is then worked and re-worked by the artist until he is satisfied. The strings of beads and chains that hang down from Tyger perform as drips, runs and splashes of paint do in painting, bringing the figure up to the picture plane. The concentration of dark vegetable 'marks' behind Tyger push him forward into our space. The backdrops are created and adjusted alongside the costumes, in the same way that the entire surface of a painting is worked and reworked over time, with reference to all other areas of the painting. Locke considers these works as photographs, paintings, performances and sculptures all-in-one. The objects used to create the work (the costumes, props etc) are not usually kept or used again, but discarded once their purpose is achieved.

The photographs in this series are ideally printed life-sized, echoing those portraits of aristocratic ancestors that stare down at admirers from the walls of the stately homes of England. Some reference ideas of Albion and Arthurian legend. Several contain the Queen's motto 'Honi soit que mal y pense' (Evil be to him who thinks Evil of it), a constant mantra throughout Locke's work. As a warning against jumping to the wrong conclusions and crediting malicious gossip or accusations, this is in truth a very apt motto for the post 9/11 world.

Portraits such as *Sir Neil O'Neill*, 1680, by John Michael Wright (right) or *Portrait of Captain Thomas Lee*, 1594, by Marcus Gheeraerts II are a direct influence.



“I like Tudor portraits or paintings of people dressed in fantasy costume – expressions of what they wanted to be, a whimsical fantasy or mythological version of themselves, another persona. My work is not simply a post-colonial expression – that idea is dead in the water for me. The work is very personal - it’s just an expression of what I am attracted to. I am attracted to the absurdities in these images. I’m attracted to the absurdity in contemporary images – how will they be read in 300 years?”

Locke mingles influences from high and low culture in a non-hierarchical manner. He references royal Tudor portraits and Ingres’ portrait of Napoleon enthroned or in the guise of Jupiter and Charlemagne. Studio photography world-wide is an obvious inspiration. Whether from Africa, palace photos of the Maharaja’s, photographs of the Black Panthers, or the video statements we have become familiar with from hostage-takers and terrorists. The male peacock display continues today of course.

“I’m interested in extreme street fashion, I regret the demise of the dancehall fashions I used to see on the streets of Brixton, which were extremely camp and bright, but very masculine. I remember three guys I saw on separate occasions in the mid 1990’s. A Nigerian man at Heathrow Airport wearing a shocking pink baby-lace outfit, walking in such a way that no-one would question his masculinity. In Brixton, a guy wearing a black denim two-piece, all covered in orange fluorescent skulls, and another time a man wearing a lime green sequined jacket and pants. He had an aggressive demeanour, a way of walking.”

The selection of a title is important, and is often chosen to stimulate the viewer’s thinking around a piece. Mention of The Congo sets most of us thinking of *The Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*, blood diamonds, King Leopold or child soldiers. *Congo Man* (detail below) is also named for a controversial 1960’s Trinidadian calypso comedy song by The Mighty Sparrow; a wildly perverse piss-take on African roots, interracial revenge, interracial sex and cannibalism.

*Two white women travelling through Africa
(Africa!)
Find themselves in the hands of a cannibal witch doctor
(Witch doctor!)
He cook up one and he eat one raw
She taste so good he wanted more
(More more more!)*

I envy the Congo Man

The song plays with the sexual stereotypes of white and black, and also the cultural tensions between black Africans and Afro-Caribbeans. Forty years on, Locke also feels the song resonates with issues of contemporary sex tourism.



Many layers and references are there to be discovered by the viewer in Locke's works. "I am interested not in black and white – but in shades of grey".

"There is an element of an role playing, of enacting shadow-sides of my personal character. I may walk around London acting genial, but then I'm also, on a shadow level...these figures are who I am. There is a whole Jungian aspect for me when dressing up as these archetypal figures. There is an aspect of wanting to explore the potential for violence within myself, and each of us, as individuals.

"These are dangerous figures, people who have done bad things. I left a part of my body uncovered in each picture because I wanted it to be clear that this is a human being. This is often a hand, which is gripping something. This grip is very important, they are holding onto something important very tight. These exposed areas are painted with lipstick– the application of this makeup helps me to get into the role I am playing – like a ritual of body painting – paints applied before dark deeds are done. The transformation is complete. The figure is not me – I have become someone else. These photographic sessions often took me to a very dark place. I have created a Country of Me"

These characters are both Hew, and Not Hew. It is interesting that one of the working titles for the project was Nemesis. 'How do you want me?' is the question many people ask when posing for posterity at a wedding or in a high-street studio.

"In a way – I am saying – OK – if this is how you see black men – than I can play up to that if you want".

An early working title for this series was *The Harder they Come*, after the film of that name (1972, Perry Henzell). In a seminal scene the singer-turned-drug-dealer 'hero' visits a photographer's shop and poses for the iconic Gangsta picture used in the film poster (right). Everyone has their favourite film or stage villain. Locke recalls the Christmas masquerade characters of his childhood "who created a perfect pitch between thrill and fear." For figures of nightmare also attract us.



"There were famous mad-men walking the streets of Georgetown (Guyana) in my childhood, with names such as Mary Bruk Iron, Law and Order, and British Guiana. It was their appearance that fascinated and scared me as a child. In a conservative society they had a complete disregard for the social norms of dress. They created their own worlds, which they lived in. Of course, tragedy goes along with this, but as adults, these are the people we reminisce about."

The title of the series has a double meaning. Many artists have a frustration with the type of exotic internationalism currently fashionable in the art world.

"Cultural fusion seems to be the norm – but I look at the simple fusions presented e.g. 'I am Chinese but I live in Paris' and feel slightly out of it.

"I've always envied artists who are very clear about what they are about – who have certainty. But for me, it is all un-certain, and this reflects the times we live in. I don't understand how you work with certainty in these current times. I am a mixed-race, black artist, born in Scotland, grew up in the Caribbean and then returned to live in England. When I was a child, my favourite instrument was the bagpipes. In this market we all need a clear story to sell – but what happens if your story is not clear? Is messy? Is chaotic?"

“I have become fascinated with dynamics of the art world I am a part of – how to operate successfully within it. I could be asking the art world ‘What is it that you want me to do?’ – and the answer may be ‘Nothing – go away!’”

The last piece Locke made was *Serpent of the Nile* (right), the only female character.

“I felt after all the masculine roles – I wanted to put on a Big Dress.”

Serpent presents herself as all-powerful, a living deity, warrior queen, Dowager Empress and Dragon Lady, someone not to be crossed. Cleopatra however was queen of a colonised country, a consummate politician who, in order to survive, brokered deals with the major powers as many Cold War leaders did.

“ I wanted to make a beautiful Ball Gown gone wrong. It’s all about survival – the deals we have to make to maintain the power we have or want. She is not necessarily a great beauty, but manipulates her image, very much as Elizabeth 1st of England did. The dress is yellow – the colour of gold. It’s all about gold.”



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www.hewlocke.net

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