

Artist Hew Locke brings his satirical exhibition to New Haven

CTI ctinsider.com/living/article/hew-locke-passages-yale-center-british-art-21091216.php

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October 23, 2025



"Hew Locke: Passages," is on view at the Yale Center for British Art, Oct. 2, 2025–Jan. 11, 2026

Richard Caspole/Courtesy of Yale Center for British Art

Artist Hew Locke, whose vibrant mixed media work is on exhibit in "Hew Locke: Passages" at the Yale Center for British Art, might not make visitors draw comparisons to "The Simpson's" creator Matt Groening.

But during an Oct. 8 press preview of an exhibit that showcases his colorful, bustling works, Locke said he kept Groening's belief about the power of the recognizable silhouette in mind in creating his own images. The silhouettes of two British queens, Elizabeth II and Victoria, are frequent motifs in Locke's nearly 50 works on view in the exhibit, which runs through Jan. 11. But the queens look far different in Locke's treatment than they do on British currency.



Hew Locke at the Yale Center for British Art, which is holding a major retrospective exhibition of his work in "Hew Locke: Passages."

This exhibition is intended to provide a comprehensive look at Locke's career, showcasing his use of diverse media including drawing, sculpture, and photography to explore themes of colonialism and postcolonial power.

Tracey O'Shaughnessy /Hearst Connecticut Media

Locke's vibrant works — iridescent send-ups of the British Royal Coat of Arms, hanging sculptures of boats and photographs of himself garnished in successive layers of flowers, toy guns, fabric and ropes of pearls and gold — are intended to skewer the visual emblems of power, greed, the commercial trade of people and the fugitive nature of wealth, curators said.

"Locke's use of ornament is central, insistent and unrelenting," Martina Droth, director of the Yale Center for British Art, writes in the exhibit catalog. "Rather than augmenting the work, it is the crux of the work itself: both figure and ground, overlay and form, like a growth that cannot be separated from its carrier....The work revolves around the stunning paradox that the highest forms of cultural ornament have historically served to bolster the most brutal acts of violence."



The Yale Center for British Art recently acquired this Hew Locke piece "Ambassador #4" for its collection. Courtesy of Yale Center for British Art

Locke's "Ambassador" series, comprising four Black figures on horseback, turns traditional equestrian imagery upside down; the sculptures look less like conquering heroes than they do Jacob Marley on horseback, weighed down by plundered artifacts, animal skins, slave pennies, chains of pearl, gold, pistols, fabric and ceramic skulls. The artist's use of what he calls "sequestered waste," simultaneously implicates colonial powers for domination and subjugation and impugns the dime-store tripe has been the residual product of global trade, said Droth.

"When you're invading a country or taking over a civilization...you definitely want plenty." Locke told The Guardian earlier this year. "You want all the gold you can grab. You're not really concerned about what this means, culturally or whatever."



Hew Locke's "Guyana House Boat 4" (2018) is on display at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. Courtesy of Yale Center for British Art

Elizabeth II's profile is evident in his piece "Koh-i-nor," which is composed of artichoke-green plastic, crimson lady bugs, pewter plastic daggers and rope upon rope of chains, garlands and plastic flowers. Britain's longest-serving monarch is festooned with so much of the effluvia of commercialist culture — doll heads, prop swords and rope upon rope of chains and garlands—that it's difficult to parse what's royal from what's just kitschy.

That, of course, is Locke's point, curators said.

"He is constantly questioning, subverting and thinking about these visual cues of imperialism and symbols of power that are hidden in plain sight," said Lucinda Lax, curator of paintings and sculpture at the museum. "He is pointing out the absurdity of all of this and the hideous reality at the same time."

Born in Edinburgh in 1959, Locke left Britain for Guyana in 1966, just as it was gaining its independence from Britain. He returned to the United Kingdom in 1980 to study art. The tumult of his early years, often funneled through the green, white, gold, red and black of Guyana's flag, slather these mixed media works in what Droth calls a "visual profusion." "Ornament provides the imprimatur of imperial acquisition; conquests of people, seizure of land, theft of resources," she wrote. "Far from being separate from Locke's conceptual investigation of imperialism, ornament is central to the expression of its violent legacies."

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In Locke's "Veni, Vidi, Vinci," the artist transforms the British Coat of Arms into a ghoulish tapestry of cut-up spearmint plastic, some of it sculpted into frowning or hooded faces, then encrusts it with looping sapphire glitter, tongues of blood-red string and cantaloupe-colored yarn that droops and drips off the bottom of the sculpture like drool. The pendant unicorn and roaring horse remain, but Locke has replaced the central heraldic panel with a red-eyed skull.



Visitors examine works from Hew Locke's "Ambassadors" series at the Yale Center for British Art.

Michael Ipsen/Courtesy of Yale Center for British Art

"This is about a document in Britain that gives access to a whole walk of people, which other people desire," said Locke at the Oct. 8 press preview, referencing emblem's place on the British passport. "It's about having an object of desire, which people are dying to get, and which other people don't give a second thought."

Among his works are a hanging flotilla of mixed-media ships that greets visitors in the center's foyer. "I was constantly aware that we are a nation that has a history in trade," Locke told The Art Newspaper in 2019. "Guyana means 'land of many waters' and to get anywhere you had to travel by boat, so the maritime thing is in my DNA. It was a colonial society with a global outlook."



Hew Locke's "Veni, Vidi, Vici (The Queen's Coat of Arms)" from 2004, is made of textile, plastic, oil stick, artificial hair and plywood. It is on display at the Yale Center for British Art through January.

Richard Capsole/Courtesy of Yale Center for British Art

That trade included the transport of people; the British brought Africans and Indians into Guyana to be enslaved in sugar plantations. If enslaved people weren't among the estimated 15% of enslaved Africans to die in the "Middle Passage," they were forced to plant, weed, slash and process sugar cane for hours in the hot sun, according to the National Museums Liverpool. It's the dual nature of the voyage and the subsequent treatment of the enslaved people that Locke lampoons and reproaches with feisty derision.

For curator Lax, Locke's "Ambassadors" serve as futuristic envoys, laden with messages from the past, overburdened with their swag. "To me, these figures are bringing messages...These horses are taking us into another kind of world, as if they are envoys from the past taking us into an unknown future. They are being weighed down by the symbols of power and wealth. Hew is critiquing the absurdity of it all," she said. "I see them as ghosts, really, as a prophetic intention."

"Hew Locke: Passages" runs at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, through Jan. 11. For more information, visit britishart.yale.edu.