



Art

## 'A live issue': Hew Locke's new work referencing slavery displayed in London

British-Guyanese sculptor's collage to be unveiled at British Academy with British Museum show in October

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**W**hen the British-Guyanese sculptor [Hew Locke](#) was asked to create a work that would hang in the British Academy, in a [building once owned](#) by the former prime minister William Gladstone, it was an offer that was too good to refuse.

It was a rare commission from a prestigious British institution, but the setting itself made it particularly alluring. "That was interesting to me; you can't say no to that," he said. "I'm all about putting my work up against certain architectural structures."

But this was not just any building. [Gladstone's father, John](#), became wealthy from his plantations in Jamaica and British Guiana (now Guyana), and was one of the largest enslavers of people in the Caribbean.

Last year [his family apologised](#) for his role in chattel slavery and [urged the UK to discuss reparations with the Caribbean](#).

It is harder to think of a more appropriate setting for Locke, whose work has revolved around ideas rooted in “politics, greed, race and history” for the past few decades.

Locke's main artistic themes have chimed with Britain's recent preoccupation with examining its history after the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020.



📷 Hew Locke's work uses imagery from his homeland of Guyana, as well as the slave trade and colonial-era buildings. Photograph: Oli Cowling

“It’s busy, which I’m not complaining about for one second because it can all go away tomorrow,” says Locke. “We live in a precarious universe and artists are like antelopes in the Serengeti and we can smell danger in the air.”

Locke means that artists’ work can be in fashion one minute and out of favour the next. But at the moment, he’s in demand: this week it was also announced that his collaborative exhibition with the [British Museum](#), *What Have We Here?*, will open in October.

He has been commissioned by the Royal Academy, the British Academy, the British Museum, the Met in New York, and Tate Britain, where he installed [Procession](#), a piece that took over the main hall and included 150 figures described as a “[roaring carnival of humanity](#)”.

“The [Black Lives Matter movement](#) changed things quite considerably,” Locke says. “It was important because all this stuff I’ve been banging on about for years, like the statue debate, all of a sudden became a live issue.”

At the British Academy, his latest work, *Raw Materials 27* - a 2-metre tall collage - will confront visitors. In [typical Locke fashion](#) it makes references to Guyana (he was born in Scotland but grew up in the Caribbean), as well as to the rubber barons of Manaus in Brazil, the slave trade that powered their wealth, and images of the now crumbling colonial buildings in Guyana.

Locke, who has said he [would have been a historian](#) if he was not an artist, said his interest in British history was born as a child in Guyana. He remembers asking himself why his school badge was of an old trading ship, and driving through hamlets and villages with Dutch, French and English names. “You’re living with the history, you don’t even have to look it up,” he says.





📷 'History is messy and we live with it,' said Hew Locke. Photograph: Oli Cowling

Raw Materials 27 joins a huge collection at the British Academy - which contains works by the likes of Paula Rego, Terry Frost and Yinka Shonibare - that is being digitised via the Bloomberg Connects app.

It is an attempt to open up the collection “for the first time to art lovers and the culturally curious wherever they are”, according to Prof Dawn Adès, the chair of the British Academy’s art committee.

What does Locke say to those who would accuse the British Academy, or indeed the British Museum, of using black artists now to be seen to address the gaps in their collections? “If you thought like that you wouldn’t do anything. There’s always a reason to not do things,” he said.

“You might say this house owned by Gladstone has a dodgy history but for God’s sake, where doesn’t, if you go back far enough? History is messy and we live with it, we live with the burden of it. What else are you going to do? Throw in the towel?”

Raw Materials 27 will be unveiled on 12 July at the British Academy as part of its Summer Showcase. What Have We Here? will open on 17 October at the British Museum.

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