ALMINE RECH

Hew Locke
Raw Materials

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Power Is Power

Almine Rech is very pleased to welcome Hew Locke in his first solo exhibition in Europe entitled *Raw Materials*. The following conversation took place between the artist and Middelheim Museum curator Pieter Boons in January 2024 and elaborates on the artist's background and his working methods. During their discussion, the artist takes the reader on a transcontinental journey to arrive, here, in Brussels, where his works are on display.

PB: Hew, you were born in Scotland in 1959 and moved to Guyana with your parents when you turned six. Can you take us back to the origin of your practice as an artist and describe your formative years?

HL: I grew up in an artistic family: my Guyanese father was a sculptor, and my British mother was a painter. They were both teachers and, although I never actively joined either of their classes, I learned a lot by watching – an experience that still informs my art to this day. Thinking back to that period I remember very clearly a moment when I was 14 years old. I was in art class painting a single hibiscus flower and after 40 minutes something clicked: I realized I wasn't copying it, but I was *creating* it by adding little drops of paint. That was a complete revelation. I thought: 'Oh, you can create something.'

PB: In 1980 you returned to the UK where you studied Fine Art at Falmouth (1988), and obtained a MA in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London (1994).

On the second day after arriving in London I went to The National Gallery to see Old Masters. There was a Rembrandt painting that completely blew my mind, it cast a spell on me. Today I still look at art a lot. Looking is actually very important and I try to discover 'why does this painting work?' I am always obsessively processing information.

PB: What can you tell us about this particular form of 'Caribbean cosmopolitanism' that seems so present in Guyana as a place where, according to the writer William Harris, 'all the distinct rivers of human culture from every continent have met.' (*The Whole Armour*, 1962)

HL: Living and growing up in Guyana in a time where the country was celebrating its Independence, in 1966. And so I became very aware of the layers of history and society in the Caribbean. People in Guyana come from everywhere: China, Holland, India, Portugal, Britain, several African countries. [...] Guyana is central to my work as it is filtered through my experiences growing up there but at the same time in also being European.

PB: Can you say that this context has a direct visual outcome in your works, which are often abundant, colorful, layered and described as witnesses of a sublime ‘too-muchness’?

HL: The mix of elements, some African, some Amerindian and European comes very natural to me, I don’t have to force myself to get there. I work on instinct. It feels like multiculturalism was invented in Guyana. Its multicultural nature is something that results in my work as a blending of influences, which I also encounter in contemporary European cities like London or Brussels.

PB: In Guyana and in Britain, you have encountered multiple histories of colonial power and they remain crucial for your work. Do you feel these histories of imperialism in Brussels as well, as a former colonial metropole that was intimately connected to large parts of Central Africa?

HL: Walking in Brussels, I don’t encounter the difficulties of the colonial past very much at first sight, but reckon these painful stories are hidden in plain sight. I like Brussels a lot because it’s not perfect, it’s like a jigsaw puzzle. Brussels is a complex place. I am not surprised that the traumas from the past are not overtly being dealt with. The past can be difficult to live with, but even if you ignore it, it’s still there. It’s just under the surface. History is not a straight line, nor a story that glorifies certain figures. It’s very messy and entangled and that’s what you feel in Brussels. It’s a city that is many several things at the same time.

PB: Why are you so fascinated by the past?

HL: When I was young I was interested in becoming a historian or archeologist if I wasn't going to be an artist, and I've ended up as an artist with an interest in history. When you see the increase in attention to podcasts and television series on the past, I think it’s because history is becoming more and more popular. It makes clear how and why things are what they are today. The past is not past, it affects us today. But it’s not my intention to lecture people on what is right or wrong. My strategy is to create an aesthetically interesting work, but also to incorporate other levels. Some might discover a darker side to the works but whether people pick this up or not, that’s also fine. There are so many stories behind every piece of work, a lot to discover.

PB: The works in this exhibition are colourful and seductive, in a way they ‘sugar the pill’. Does the visitor need to be seduced?

HL: In my work I’m always looking for balance. When I was young I wanted to work for the United Nations, a combination of history and diplomacy which I’ve always found very interesting. I can’t live in pain, and I like beauty, even if it’s just only about aesthetic pleasure, that is fine. I might deal with the tricky past, but I need to live with things that I enjoy.

PB: The works in this show look very different, although there are also a lot of similarities: all works have elements from a recent colonial past, connect different continents, and use the same overall technique: masquerade or dress-up. Maybe it’s no coincidence that at the time of the exhibition in Brussels we will have witnessed the yearly period of Carnival parades, like the one in Ostend?

HL: For years I didn’t talk about carnival as I found my works were being dismissed as Folk Art, a cultural stereotype. Some works deal with masquerade or imply aspects of the carnivalesque of the sort that might be familiar to some European cities. In the Caribbean, carnival was a celebration for the end of slavery, but it became something different after Emancipation. And of course it also has religious aspects coming from Catholicism. I feel that today people take carnival much more seriously. These festivals and celebrations are a global thing, so there might be a human need to have them? The intriguing thing is that it’s a very democratic thing: it’s critical, humorous and cathartic.

PB: Maybe this is also what your works are doing: combining elements from the past with humor, beauty and critique in such a way that they become something new: they are cathartic and open up new perspectives.

PB: There are two series of works in the exhibition. One series is *Share*, which is an ongoing group of works that you have been producing since 2008. *Raw Materials* is the largest presentation of textile share works (20 pieces), how did this series come about?

HL: So, in 2008 I did an exhibition in New York and three days after the opening, Lehman Brothers fell and everything fell apart in a global financial crisis. Wondering how to react on this back in London, I stumbled across old financial share documents of companies that had gone bankrupt decades earlier. I wanted to invest in dead companies. They became a fascination of mine and a symbol of hope: we had been here before, and we had survived a crisis... History is a cyclical movement. I got fascinated by the fact that we had bounced back. We are actually, as humans, a very optimistic species – always founding new companies. Finding the right certificates to tell a story became an obsession. One example, for instance, is the Greek Government Refugee Loan share of 1924; In that year the semi-bankrupt Greek Government signed contracts with Greek, British and American banks for a loan of over £12 million. The proceeds were specifically for the Refugee Settlement Commission. One hundred years later, Greece is again a center for refugees. So, this work – and all works – are about cycles of history, not necessarily repeating but touching base with previous similar incidents.

PB: A lot of your works incorporate skulls and skeletons, how is death present in your practice?

HL: I wouldn't say that the works are really about death or dying, they are rather a memento mori filled with optimism and hope. They are about life. Skeletons are an interesting form of cliché. I'm interested in the duality between misery and hope, and I translate this into the formal aspects of my work. For instance, the work with the fleeing people in the boat, they are indeed refugees but are also going towards a better life. Even if they are facing mortality and risking their lives, the skulls and skeletons accompanying them are not dead or sad, they are playful and dancing: a *danse macabre*.

PB: And the decaying houses, represented in some works, are they related to death, decay, ghosts?

HL: Actually not, they show the passing of time, of history: they were once beautiful colonial wooden houses, in Guyana, but they are great houses no more because economically they are too hard to conserve. They fell apart. This makes me sad because, on a personal level, it is my childhood that is disappearing. Showing them in Brussels is for me the passing of a colonial age, just like when you walk here on the streets of this city you might get the same feeling. They are not just haunted houses, there is much more going on. In Raw Materials 18, I got to know the owner of that house, who is black, and whose Dad used to work for the owners of the house, wishing that 'one day he would own that house' – and now he *does* own it, but what he owns is disappearing bit by bit. So, he only owns the ruin, actually. In this image, there are a lot of different stories: the guy with the gun is an escaped slave, a Maroon, and the Panama Canal share certificate was from a French company that tried to make the canal, but failed. The company employed a lot of Caribbean workers. The house is a symbol of our late capitalist society. It's falling apart, failing to shelter all of its inhabitants. These houses represent the passing of time.

PB: Visually there is a buildup of layers, stories that are being added onto the debris of the past.

HL: The work shows how things have changed and shifted over time, and that's what this exhibit is about. It's a cyclical thing. Looking at the shares, I had in mind a very global, interlinked project. I'm talking about something very wide, for instance, I used a lot of Chinese bonds. China is now very present in Africa but the bonds from late 1898 date from China's 'century of shame'. Superimposing the map of Africa shows how tremendously the relationship has changed between China and Africa. China has become the number one go-to business partner for Africa rather than Europe. I keep adding layers and layers. That is what makes it very contemporaneous because history is much more fragmented than what was taught to us at school. This layering and fragmentation have a beauty unto themselves. And that brings us back to a place like Brussels where you can feel this layering very much.

PB: Let's turn to the other series in the show, the antique bust *Souvenir* series, which actually shares a similar visual layering with the *Share* works. How did you create these artworks and what do they represent?

HL: Years ago, I discovered a bust in an antique shop, and upon seeing it, in my mind I already owned it, you know, but I just had to arrange the transaction and hand over the money. It sat with me about nine months in the studio, and eventually I started loading it with medals. Queen Victoria has almost a turban on her head! Some imagery is directly related to Empire and, although Victoria is very British, she is a symbol for a European family 'tribe' that was connected to Russian tsars, and related to Leopold II of Belgium. She is a global figure in a colonial framework.

PB: What material and historical connections have you realized on the busts?

HL: The Queen Mother mask from Benin is right at the center on Victoria's headress, but also images from the Congo and Afghanistan and even pre-Columbian imagery are present. On the side are Benin bronzes and also Portuguese mercenaries. These added elements represent to me the weight of history that is weighing down these historical figures. The more you look at it, the more entangled the past becomes.

PB: All works in the show are a representation of power. Why are you so fascinated by power?

HL: I remember a scene from *Game of Thrones* where a man says to a queen: 'Information is power.' The queen says to a guard: 'Kill him.' The guard takes his sword but then the queen says: 'Wait, stop.' And then she says to the man: 'Power is power.' Power is an interesting thing. Certainly, in this election year, power is on the agenda for 2024. What I find interesting is not just power, but people wanting it – and what they will do to get it. Symbols of power have always interested me: money, treasure, regalia, clothing. In Britain's annual State Opening of Parliament, the crown was too heavy for Queen Elizabeth to wear, so it sat next to her on a cushion. It was a symbolic thing: this kind of symbolism is what is interesting to me.

PB: Are your works power objects?

HL: Yes, but I'm looking for a more nuanced relationship with power. There are always multiple relations and answers. I'm also aware that I don't have power over my work. Certainly when a piece is finished, it has nothing to do with me anymore.

PB: Thus, your work is also part of the cyclical movement that it illustrates?

HL: Exactly, in that way it's showing the layering and then turning on itself. I also realize that my work can change over time, as society also changes. My work is alive, it's active.

PB: So, is your work then like *Raw Materials*, something that is processed and thus evolves over time?

HL: The title of this show is referring to commodities. For example it refers to the cotton fabric of the works. In that way, raw materials are not only the actual materials of the works (fake hair, cotton, glue, metal, [...]), but also the elements from the past that I am processing. Assembling and layering create something new; a reworking of the past is the sole condition for a different future.

Hew Locke (b. 1959, in Edinburgh) is a contemporary artist, living and working in London. Locke's artistic practice explores the visual codes of power, and draws attention to a wide range of genres, such as royal portraiture, maritime and military history, public statuary, trophies, and financial documents through which his art is expressed. His ability to fuse influences from his Caribbean and British origins, together with his own political and cultural concerns, makes for witty, multilayered works that amalgamate modern materials with historical subject matter. Applying a critical sensitivity to his own creative practice, Locke's work stands at a crossroads between cultural associations and historic references from where he interrogates the symbols of our era. During his more than 35-year career, Locke has received commissions by prestigious art institutions such as The Met and Tate Britain. In summer 2024, he will participate in *Come Closer*, a group show at Antwerp's Middelheim Museum. In 2025, the Yale Centre for British Art will curate a solo show of the artist and publish a monograph on his career to date.

Pieter Boons (b. 1980, in Belgium) lives and works between Antwerp and Ostend. He is curator and head of exhibitions at Middelheim Museum, in Antwerp. His projects consist mainly in collaborating with contemporary artists on the creation of new artworks.