

Transcription
Javier Pes in conversation with Hew Locke
The Royal Society of Sculptors
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JP: As Caroline said, the pretext for this conversation is the spectacular exhibition that is on now in the IKON gallery in Birmingham, where Hew has filled all the galleries. Two floors of galleries with some extraordinary works and none more so than the work I was going to start with, which in a way is the kind of the finale of the show, but there are so many layers to it.

First of all ... you said boats are in your DNA, I just wanted to ask you how so?

HL: I grew up in Guyana, to get to Guyana as a kid... the only way to get there back then was by boat. So, I went the Guyana by boat and that was in my brain from early on. But, Guyana is a country which, you travel a certain distance and before you know it you have to take a boat because of the big rivers and there were no bridges over the big rivers back then. And so, taking boats and ferries was a really common and every day thing. Boats were always around and learning to paddle a small boat when you're young in a creek that was a normal thing.

JP: But the boats in the show are laden with boats. Some are historic boats and others boats that are sea worthy. You get a sense that you are more than a maritime historian, what is going on?

HL: There are Tudor war ships and all sorts of boats in there, but also in there is a tiny model of the Empire Wind Rush and that for me, was the final piece to put in to the show. I put in it actually while I was installing it. So, that sort of fixes the whole thing basically.

JP: So, for you and everyone obviously Wind Rush has gone from an historic event that most of us would celebrate to something that is now a political issue and now were talking about a post-wind rush. But, this is your family history surely.

HL: No, well that's the thing, it sort of is not. Because my family, my father from Guyana came to study at art school and met my mother who is English at art school and then they got married in Guyana. So, he came and he went back. I remember us in the late 60s coming by boat here on a Spanish line. On that boat there were loads of people coming here to settle. There were other boats after Wind Rush and they bought lots of people *here*, which I wasn't really sure where *here* was at the time because I was concentrating on the fact that we were only here for a short while. We all came back.

JP: When you refer to these models, the models *in* the sculpture how do you think about them? They are very sculptural. They are not model maker models. They are very edited and stylised in a way.

HL: Yes. I am trying to not make models. People call them models but they are not really model boats, even if I buy them as models they are customised in a way so that they are on the edge of being a model and not a model. I try to do something that is representational of a particular thing. So say that the galleons, they may be the Bounty.

They may be other boats. The Mayflower. I'm trying to have the representation of a colonial history representation. Things like the slave trade, migration, trade in general. So they represent things, but then you make the work and put it out there and what people think, that is another conversation.

JP: Is this an installation that is a work in progress or is the Empire Wind Rush a finale piece in the work.

HL: This particular piece for me yes. This is now a set piece in a sense. I mean, there were other boats to go into the mix but you always have to have more than you need. So you can edit and refine. It was a weird install. These boats had been made, but I did not know how it would look. It was guess work and visualization. And what you are looking at here, are the key to the whole thing. It is these rafts. The boats are all dotted around with these floating bits of rafts, the wreckage from wrecks of boats or what someone may grab on to in a sinking boat.

The lifeboat there, is covered in a whole mess, a wreckage of boats, it is symbolic obviously of distress at sea. Without labouring the point too much, if you see what I mean.

JP: Is the Chinese ship that got stuck in the Suez Canal, is that part of the flotilla?

HL: Oh, the work as you go in to the show. Yes, yes.

JP: ... and the lovely back-story to that is that it was supposed to take part in the royal pageant and got stuck.

HL: Yes, I couldn't make it.

JP: What appealed to you about that piece?

HL: Well, that is displayed opposite an image in the show of HMS Belfast surrounded by fighter planes from the Korean War. But what appealed to me about that is the just the fact that a) it is a beautiful object and b) it is flying the flag of the Chinese flag. And then it is like 'ah. This is not just about this boat sailing up and down. This is making a statement.' It is an attractive thing but you know what this is about ... Soft power is something that I find very interesting. Every country does it you know? And this is something that was to take part in the regatta but also is part of the hand over of Beijing Olympics to the London Olympics and I thought it was interesting that was going past HMS Belfast, different bits of history going past each other.

JP: That brings me to HMS Belfast, because one of the real surprises in the show is this extraordinary video installation, which takes you on a journey of the floating branch in the Imperial War Museum in the Thames where the HMS Belfast saw sterling service in the World War II right through to the Cold War. But you did something to this public monument ... what did you do?

HL: Okay, so here is the thing. The Imperial War Museum asked me to do something on HMS Belfast and, for those of you who don't know, HMS Belfast is a museum, it is part of the IMW Museum. So I came up with all sort of grand ideas. We can do this, we can do that, and we can turn it in to a missile ship one giant missile ship. So, I was looking into

quotations for giant missiles, but that was an insane budget and it wasn't going to happen.

And then, what I realised is that there are mannequins, figures, demonstrating everyday tasks inside the boat. And all you have to do is put a mask on them and that changes the narrative completely of what was going on. In doing a lot of research into the HMS Belfast, its last journey was to the Caribbean. It stopped of at Jamaica; gave Jamaica independence... and then moved through and stopped at Trinidad. This was in August and imagined what if it had turned up in Trinidad in time for carnival. What if these guys got a band together, what if they wee a masked band, what if they were tourists. That is where the idea came from. And to their credit, the curators who were there thought, yes let's go with this. It just changed the nature of the boat.

I had music playing throughout the boat, which was from Calypsos, Rum Coca-Cola, and Brown Skin Girl. These songs are all about prostitution basically, sailors and prostitution. The point was that these are not saints, they are human beings, they may do something heroic but they may not be. We have a complicated thing these days... about the relationship to the idea of the hero. And I think it is embarrassment of how, how people in the military have been treated. You see a veteran off his head on the tube and people ignore it, this guy needs some mental help. But it is the idea of the fact that these guys have an earthy sense of humour and they are one step away from death. They're bored, and then there's excitement and fear all combined in one. This is about their inner dialogues and inner fears. It was trying to be an honest thing basically.

JP: It is quite extraordinary really. These are museum mannequins that we know and love and always look a bit stagey, but it is so extraordinary, not only the costume that they are wearing in the carnival but also you tattooed them.

HL: Yes, yes also tattoos. That again was with research... the tattoos were designed so they faded like those faded blue tattoos, those old sailor tattoos not the fancy tattoos of today, old tattoos. Some of them refer to many things, one of which was a subtle hidden thing and that was about the gay relationship I imagined between two cooks.

At that point in time, if you were in the navy at sea you were safe. I am talking about before the decriminalisation. If you were at sea it was fine, it was okay. So, a number of different things, one of the tattoos refer to the Cold War and the Korean War, atomic bombs etc. It is weird talking about this. As I am talking I am digesting and thinking. There is a complex thing talking about dark and light, safety and danger.

JP: I should say at this point, not that you are breaking an official secret, but you had to sign a non-disclosure agreement...

HL: [Laughter] Yes, as I was signing it I was laughing saying, 'well this is never going to be a problem, and it's no big deal...' Anyhow ...

JP: ... a letter, article, was published in the Times...

HL: Yes, there was an article or a letter in the Times saying 'how dare this person come in and offend national dignity...' So I had to go on national radio and defend the piece and said look it is not a historical thing, this is a poetic look. It is actually not a criticism of the

navy whatsoever. It is trying to put out something honest and trying to be a positive spin on things. Let's have a debate about the nature of heroes. It is a long time ago...

JP: I am going to take you back a little bit further... I think maybe a lot of us first knew your work because of your interventions and public monuments. And you have talked before about your experience and your really formative experience of Queen Victoria being knocked off her pedestal in Guyana. But for people who haven't heard of this, could you put it in to context?

HL: Yes of course. Guyana was a British colony. I arrived in Guyana at a time of independence, so I see the flag being made, I see the coat of arms being made. Shortly, years after independence, there was a Queen Victoria statue where her hand had been dynamited off and her nose had been blown off by independence activists ...

After this, she was in front of the Victoria Law Courts and they thought this is now the Guyana Law Courts it is time for you to go, so she was taken and dumped at the back of the botanical gardens, and it is a bit like what happened at the end of Communism. Like she had been thrown behind God's back, a place nobody goes. The statue then lay on its side and its head had broken off and it was propped up.

Then several years later, the then President's wife dies and, in my instinct of it anyways, they then thought you know what those days are done, we don't need to worry about this thing anymore, it is history, let's put her back up in front of the courts again. And so it is Guyana Law Courts with Queen Victoria in the front there. Everything in fine but was it? Six months ago, someone posted on my Facebook feed that someone had thrown red paint on it and so somebody was obviously still upset about this particular thing ...

JP: You have been creating new work based around not only Queen Victoria, but others. I know that when you look closely and these works at the IKON she is still a bit battered isn't she?

HL: She is still a bit battered, yes. They never restored the broken bits and so it stands there as this thing. What I like about it and what I find fascinating about it is that it's almost like ... early Andy Warhol Multiple, we got one for Guyana, Trinidad? Another one for you ... it is like a present you cannot refuse.

JP: ... and so these were really were mass-produced ?

HL: This is mass-produced. This is like the Victorian age where you are not Duke 'so and so' you are somebody in middle or lower middle class house, but you want to have symbol of empire or royalty.

Right, we got this new thing called Parian ware; unglazed china and they were mass-produced through the ages. Queen Victoria throughout her life, they made images of King Edward and his wife, and it is just mass-produced and sat on people's mantle pieces. That is what I did I turned them into votive things ... and they are covered in badges from different regiments, so lots of royal engineer badges, lots of royal artillery badges ... it is to do with history. It is to do with the weight of history and the burden of history, which we still deal with in Guyana.

I will just briefly say Guyana is created ... basically if there is a war in Europe countries would change hands regularly, Guyana is still dealing with the fact Walter Raleigh went there for El Dorado and the boarder was set, but Venezuela didn't agree to that. And so, these historical things can have long-term repercussions ... but that is another conversation.

JP: Venezuela is just over the boarder isn't it... To get to the adorning bit, they adorn but they also feel smothered, is she tattooed ?

HL: That is embroidery. Embroidery of a statue from the democratic republic of Congo, which I just happened to like and it just seemed the right thing to do. But she is adorned; in the same way the Madonna would be adorned. You know the Madonna in Spain... with things donated by devotees. That is what this is about. That is what the whole series I suppose is about, you know.

JP: Usually you have worked with photographs and adorned photographs and now your sort of adorning small sculptures.

HL: Yes, this is like a lot of artists now. You're doing something and you think you know what? I am going to take a gamble on this. I'm not sure whether it is going to work but instinctively I think is the right thing to do and then before you know it, it becomes part of your work and you forget the trepidation you had, am I screwing up here? Am I going to be throwing loads of money down the drain...?

JP: Were you in bidding wars to buy these Parian [wares]?

HL: Yes, bidding wars... power snipe that's the way to go.

JP: What is power snipe?

HL: Power snipe is a thing because if you bid and bid and bid online you always get trumped... if you sign up your limit on power snipe that means the seller doesn't know you actually willing to pay a certain amount of money. So, power snipe puts in your bid right and the last minute and usually you get it.

JP: Where do you source the regalia?

HL: Oh, that's from a shop in Cecil Court, an antique, military shop. It is all real stuff.

JP: Oh wow, even the tiny pieces?

HL: Well, some of the decorative bits are sourced as part of stuff for jewellery making. But the badges etc. they are all military accessories and replica medals.

JP: Before we get to the big reveal... this isn't Thomas Brock, but this is what should have and could have happened. That print was made for an equestrian statue... Was he an imperialist who?

HL: He, like a lot of London statues he is pretty anonymous, he is outside the BBC now on Regent Street, he is Field Marshal George White. He won the Victorian Cross in the second Afghanistan War. So, he is a Victorian Cross holder. I depict him covered in stuff

from Afghanistan, from that time and from before, and at this time Britain, U.K, was still in Afghanistan. It is about the fact that we sort of ignore history, you know? We forget. Like, if you'd have asked somebody in the 1980s 'Have you ever heard of a place called Bosnia?' They would go, 'I don't know, what the hell is that?'

So this is covered in stuff to do with Alexander the Great, covered in loads of medals, it is about the burden of history, the weight of history and that we keep repeating things. Not exactly the same but echoes.

JP: are you pointing the finger of blame...?

HL: To a certain extent yes. I am making something attractive, 'come in, come and look at this', and then someone goes 'hang on... what's that? Oh my god that is a war Ashanti medal. Oh wait a minute, the Ashanti war happened during the lifetime of this character. The Parian art is a reaction to a young Queen Victoria and all the romanticising which is happening now of that particular period in time when it wasn't benign. I think things have been smoothed over. For me, my approach is not to beat people over the head with things, but to make attractive thing but also get people to think deeper. Not to have an instant gut reaction because you may have pushed them away completely. It's to say come in and let's have a conversation about this shall we say.

JP: This is New York, as we know they have been toppling statues, particularly in the south. New York is now wrestling with the statues and where they should be. I think some are going to stay put and others are going to get shuffled off to wherever... the equivalent of a botanical garden, maybe Brooklyn cemetery. Could you just talk us through this one...?

HL: Okay, so what you are looking at are photographs, which are about 6ft x 4ft high printed on to aluminium and printed on to wood and wood fixings. The objects there are various decorative brass objects and brass etchings and they are all screwed to the photograph. It is a bit like back in the day when you go to Spain and you buy a postcard ... that's where it's coming from. So, these are two of the same guy, Peter Stuyvesant, and this is the last Dutch Governor of New York. There was a big fuss in America and New York about people taking down confederate statues, and so maybe we should be thinking about maybe removing our guys? Because, he was anti-Semitic, he didn't want Jews living in NY at all. So I thought, well let's deal with him and sort of point out who they are, so I have decorated them with part of their story other stories as well, because he didn't like Catholics, he hated Native Americans. So, an all around nice guy... [laugh]

The one on the left is in New Jersey, which they love and they call him old peg leg. This was his retirement post where his leg got blown off in conflict down in the Caribbean. His retirement job was in New York and Governor of New York. But as I said, he didn't want Jewish people living there, so the debate was the one on the right... let's get rid of him. There were all sorts of arguments all over the place. Eventually they decided, no, we will leave him where he is. So that is what this is about, basically it is about statues and controversy, and debating all sorts of things...

JP: I have been itching to get to this point... this is going back to Birmingham. Where we began and Thomas Brock ... but not as you know him.

Where about in Birmingham is it?

HL: Right in the middle of Birmingham, outside the Museum, right in the heart of Birmingham.

JP: Centenary Square.

HL: Yes, these are the first basic sketches. And there is a Queen Victoria statue there, and the Queen Victoria statues are exported all over the world as I said, and the idea is basically to build a boat around it. Put her in a crate and with multiples. They become these Andy Warhol type things. They are always the same you know?

These are other ideas and these are just for scale.

This one is much more Egyptian on the left hand side. But these things are complex. Doing an idea is one thing, doing it in reality is quite a different kettle of fish. Because it is a historic monument, so you have to be careful, you can't have any metal next to it. You have to be careful of paint and stuff like that, because of oxidisation. So, there are loads of constraints and then working against it with the constraints, it's like okay, how can we produce something which is spectacular?

JP: When we first met and we were talking then about the sculpture of Bristol's most honoured slave trader, and I asked you, because you couldn't do what you normally do, but you could do what would be an almost gorilla style intervention over night. But that doesn't interest you and I wanted to find out why?

HL: No, because I don't want to be in jail. Gorilla style thing would get notoriety and stuff like that, I mean it's the reason why Banksy's name isn't officially out there – because people would literally put him in jail despite him being who he is.

So, this here... It is almost like right. So here you have the constraints, let's see what you can do within the constraints. And that makes the challenge even more of a challenge. That makes it more fascinating. How can we pull off something amazing?

JP: And what's your feeling of the sculptors, Thomas Brock, Whitney Vanderbilt, the woman who founded the Whitney Museum.

HL: Well, I have a lot of respect for them. Because these are academic sculptors, highly skilled, you know what I mean? I am not an academic sculptor in that way at all. There is no way I look down on the skill ... They are keeping a career going, I have got to respect that. What they are doing, I wouldn't necessarily approve of the image they are trying to put across. But at the same time, it is not sneering at these people at all. That for me would be a bit foolish because these people are good.

JP: So how do you feel when you see the news, and it comes out from wherever it is, from New Orleans to obviously Charlottesville - where things got really violent - But even when we were emailing about San Francisco. A very ideologically fraught...

HL: Yes, an image of a priest converting a Native American. That was a big a debate about removing it. What do I think about that? Well, what I think about that and what I always think about that: that a lot of these confederate statues were taken down; put up long after the Civil War. They were put up to basically show black people who were in

charge. They weren't about history they were about something a lot different. So, from that point of view I think, get rid of them, they don't need to be there.

When it comes in to other things I think, well you know what? If you got rid of that, then people's memory would have been got rid of as well. And sometimes I think no, no let's keep that there. Just so people remember, you know what, that happened, because it is very easy if some monuments are removed that people don't remember what happened. I think the piece in San Francisco is still there isn't it? There will be on-going debates as to whether we can move this thing. Because this image of this conversion thing, it's quite an unpleasant image.

I don't think I can say to other people, do this, do that.

Here, it is tricky. Here is a statue of Captain Cook. If you are our age you know Captain Cook is not a cool person at all. I think well leave him up there so people know who they are, but the thing is these people need to know the background of who these people are. That is the issue.

JP: As to say, with out jinxing anything, you describe it as a redressing. And so will divide opinion, hopefully people will see this sculpture in a new way...

HL: Well, that's the thing these things are invisible. People walk by them every day and they don't really see them any more ... I try to draw people's attention to the fact this is an object which has been exported around the world. And loads of countries in the Commonwealth have this statue, replicated. I have a catalogue and there is page after page of completely identical Queen Victoria statues. Completely fascinating!

JP: I have grilled you too much, but I want to open the conversation to our audience and distinguished sculptors like yourself. My only final thing was I am glad you weren't a historian in the conventional sense and all this would be lost in some unreadable article with lots of footnotes, instead what we get is some fantastic art.

Q&A

Q1: I have a question about boats. There are quite a few in various installations throughout your career. How for you have these boats changed, how are they different?

HL: Every time I do a boat they are calculated for the space. They are all intensely detailed, they are a group but they can hold their own. They all have got little imaginary stories behind them. They all have their little story. The boats I did before in 2011 they were suspended in the way up in the air. This is different (at IKON). I want them dropped down; I want people looking at them at eye level and looking at the stories, picking the detail out. You walk along the side of them and they are moving. I can't explain how, they are just moving. The story is bigger. The stories today are now much more complex, much more detail and much more nuance. Even though you can't get in to the middle of these guys, it is designed so you can see what is going on. You can read them. A bigger story basically ... and a lot more work.

JP: You've also infiltrated one of your boats into a pre-existing hanging sculpture in Bremen in the town hall.

HL: Yes, that was just great. Okay so this is Bremen town hall and it is the only thing in Bremen that wasn't bombed. In Bremen town hall for hundreds of years they have had these old model boats, which are 3m long each. Maybe even bigger, they are just massive model boats from the 17th century. They have been up there for ever and Germany is going through this whole decolonizing and looking at their colonial history so they got me to commission and make a boat to go in its place. And that is like a dream commission. These boats have never been taken down before. It was like putting a boat half in the present and half in the past. Half talking about history and the present being migration, refugees and you don't know whether it is going to work or not. And it worked. It was only meant to be up a couple of months but they're keeping it up for two years.

Q2: When you find yourself in the real politics, I know you find yourself in museums, but when you doing something like in HMS Belfast or out in public and suddenly Trip Advisor is advising people not to go to the HMS Belfast... How do you feel about those things? How do you react to those things? Do you enjoy the notoriety?

HL: I am not a notoriety kind of person if you know what I mean. I was surprised, because it had been quiet for over a month and obviously hell let loose. I wasn't trying to stir up controversy but I was hoping to get a reaction of course, but it was strange because back in the day this was the stock and trade of the so-called YBA thing, set up and shock people. Whereas I was coming from a different point of view, let's try to create a reaction but a reaction coming from somebody who has done research. It was weird, what annoyed me, was give people a chance to see this. I can't say more because I signed an agreement.

Q2: The piece was closed down, it was very, very sad and the piece was amazing! If anyone wants to go and see the film, please do, because you get a lot of pleasure from it. It's much more than just a shock value. But what was so interesting to me was the sort of 'thought police' in Britain. That there are these people everywhere that want to close down thought, that want to close down interesting argument or debate. The thing that I suppose surprised me the most about it was how powerful it actually still is.

HL: For me I was taken by surprise. I put up the exhibition and I was shockproof. But I should have known I was in for interesting complications. This boat has got different stories going on and right next to one of the figures is a chapel, and the chapel is still a working chapel. So, I specifically avoided that, because you don't interfere with that, that is offensive. So I thought I was okay, but as I say I went on to the boat and I thought, ah, there are complex things going on here.

Q3: I really enjoyed the HMS Belfast, for me it was your ship. What happens when you move into a project like that... Do you get that tipping where the whole building becomes this power?

HL: Very much so. HMS Belfast for me... I had the idea but then we were working in the studio and I went with one of my assistants and we took three masks with the curators there with us. We went one, two, three and thought 'Fine. We are in business here.' Then it is a balancing act, it can't look contemporary, it has to look period, but it then it can't look period.

Event comes to an end.