

Resistant Forms: Robert Leckie on Donald Locke's Five Decades of Experimentation

INTERVIEW 23 October 2025

Curated by Robert Leckie, the exhibition 'Donald Locke: Resistant Forms' brings together more than eighty works tracing the Guyanese-British artist's journey across Guyana, the United Kingdom, and the United States.



Donald Locke, *Redoubt*, 1972. Ceramic, wood, formica, steel, 46 x 109 x 76cm. Courtesy Estate of Donald Locke and Alison Jacques, London. © Estate of Donald Locke. Photo: Tom Meyer.

'Donald Locke: Resistant Forms' is now open at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham. Curated by Robert Leckie, Director of Gasworks in London, the exhibition is the first significant survey of the Guyanese-British artist Donald Locke (1930–2010). Spanning five decades, the show follows Locke's evolution from his early biomorphic ceramics of the 1960s to the politically charged *Plantation Series* of the 1970s and the large-scale mixed-media paintings he produced in the 1990s. Working between Guyana, the UK, and the US, Locke forged a visual language that merges abstraction, myth, and memory through clay, steel, paint, and found materials. His art examines the intertwined histories of colonialism and modernity, while asserting the cultural and imaginative agency of the African diaspora. In conversation, Leckie reflects on Locke's formal inventiveness, his resistance to categorisation, and the enduring relevance of his work today.

ARTAFRICA: Donald Locke lived and worked across Guyana, the UK, and the United States. How does the exhibition trace the impact of these different cultural contexts on his artistic development?

Robert Leckie: The exhibition tracks Locke's artistic development across five decades, from the mid-1960s to the late 2000s. Each body of work on display captures the impact of the different cultural contexts that he inhabited throughout his life. In the grouping of 'twin forms' and biomorphic sculptures that you first encounter, for example, you can recognise the influence of Locke's tutors at Bath Academy of Art in the 1950s, such as the ceramicist James Tower (1919–1988), who was committed to formalism and the idea of the 'truth of materials'.

The show also highlights how, when Locke moved to London in the early 1970s, his work became more political in subject and form. He began to directly reference the plantation system in Guyana, using grids of steel tacks in his monochromatic black paintings, or found metal bars to contain unruly, organic forms in his mixed-media sculptures. It is during this stage in his career that, reflecting on it later, Locke said his own work 'truly began'.

But it didn't stop there, as leaps forward and backwards continued to occur for the rest of Locke's life. When he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study ceramics at Arizona State University in 1979, he became fascinated with the unique, arid landscape of the American West and the sculptural potential of bronze, making work that is quite unlike anything he made before or after.

Despite having lived and worked in Guyana, the UK and the US before, however, it was his move from Arizona to Atlanta in the American South in 1990 that had the most profound impact on him. This is where he encountered the work of artists such as Radcliffe Bailey, Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial for the first time, beginning to make increasingly free-spirited work that would increasingly return to the memories and mythologies of his childhood in Guyana.

Locke's *Plantation Series* has been described as "sculptural metaphors" for systems of subjugation. How did you approach presenting these works to contemporary audiences while acknowledging their historical weight?

Locke described these works as 'sculptural metaphors where forms are held in strict lines, connected as if with chains held within a system of metal bars or metal grids, analogous to the system whereby one group of people were kept in economic and political subjugation by another group.'



Installation view of 'Resistant Forms' at Ikon Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of Ikon. Photo: Tom Bird.

Though these and other works he made directly reference the deeply traumatic history of the plantation, I do not think that any of these works are necessarily 'about' the plantation, or at least not in a simple sense. I think the word 'metaphors' was key to Locke, who was in many ways a formalist who remained committed to abstraction throughout his life. Indeed, he would actively refuse political readings of these works when they were made and did not fully come to terms with their political potency himself until much later in life. This, in fact, is one of the first things that drew me to his work: that it is in some ways profoundly political but not always clearly legible as such.

Regarding how to present works that reference traumatic histories such as this to contemporary audiences, we have tried to situate these works in Locke's broader trajectory as an artist, emphasising how they are informed by his own experience of the plantation system, having grown up in colonial British Guiana and lived between two plantations as a young child. They are also by no means gratuitous; instead, they bring an unorthodox perspective to a shared history that I think we all need to reckon with.



Donald Locke, *Trophies of Empire #2 (The Cabinet of Billy Mick Miller [Altar Piece of Hernando Cortez])*, 2006-08. Bronze, wood, ceramic, metal, hair, found objects, paint, ribbon, acrylic, 180 x 320 x 23cm. Courtesy of Ikon. Photo: Tom Bird.

The exhibition spans over eighty works across five decades. What guided your selection process in shaping a survey that reflects both the continuity and evolution of Locke's practice?

Locke was deeply committed to experimentation throughout his life, which makes summarising his practice difficult. At the same time, I would argue that his refusal to settle is precisely what makes his work so compelling, and the story of his life such an interesting story to tell. The guiding principle of the exhibition was to try to represent each 'chapter' of Locke's practice, from his early experiments with biomorphic forms in the 1960s, to his mixed-media sculptures and monochromatic black paintings made during the 1970s right through to his experiments with bronze in the 1980s, the series of large-scale mixed media paintings he made in Atlanta during the 1990s, and his more narrative, mythology-inspired works in clay and wood from the 2000s. Having said this, the two most significant points of focus are the works he made during the 1970s and 1990s. This is partly because Locke made some of his best work during these decades, but also due to practical reasons, including the rising costs of transatlantic shipping and the fact that a complete retrospective would have to be museum-scale. The selection was also guided by the works available in UK collections, including Tate, York Art Gallery, the Fitzwilliam Museum, and the private collection of Lorenzo Leviste and Fahad Mayet. Given the fact that Locke's 2009 show at New Art Exchange in Nottingham (curated by Indra Khanna) focused on his *Pork Knocker* series from the early 2000s, it also felt less urgent to represent his later work in the show more fully.

Locke drew on a wide range of materials — ceramic, steel, vinyl, wood, and found photographs. How do you see materiality functioning in his work as a vehicle for history, memory, and resistance?

Locke was omnivorous in his approach to materials. As well as clay, paint, bronze and charcoal, he often worked with found materials, ranging from photographs, newspaper clippings and pieces of scrap wood and metal through to various animal furs that he bought at flea markets. He was fascinated by how these materials carry their own histories with them, while at the same time being committed to the idea that fully decoding their meaning when they came together would and should not be possible. So, while ideas of history and memory were often at the forefront of Locke's mind when he was making work, he would have been more reluctant to accept the idea of these materials being a 'vehicle for resistance'. With the title of the show, 'Resistant Forms', we had in mind more the idea that Locke's work is resistant to categorisation or eludes capture. Though he did directly address traumatic socio-political histories in his work, I have the impression that these were primarily formal explorations, weighted by history, his own personal experience and the books he read more than by a particular politically resistant ideology.

The exhibition also highlights the influence of African American vernacular art and iconography on Locke's practice after his move to the United States. How does this phase connect back to his Guyanese heritage and earlier concerns?



Donald Locke, *Fish Eye Buby*, 2009, From *The Pork Knocker Portraits*. Graphite, collage on paper, 46 x 38cm. Courtesy Spike Island. Photo: Rob Harris.



Installation view of 'Resistant Forms' at Ikon Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of Ikon. Photo: Tom Bird.

The exhibition also highlights the influence of African American vernacular art and iconography on Locke's practice after his move to the United States. How does this phase connect back to his Guyanese heritage and earlier concerns?

This influence began to take hold when Locke moved from Phoenix, Arizona, to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1990. It was here that he encountered the work of artists such as Radcliffe Bailey, Lonnie Holley and Thornton Dial for the first time. Their work inspired him to make more figurative, free-spirited work in ceramics, collage and wood during the late 1990s and 2000s; work that often return to the mythological stories he recalled from his childhood in Guyana, as well as notorious characters from the colonial history of Latin America, such as the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his notorious interpreter, La Malinche.

It is also during this period that Locke made a follow-up to his most famous work from the 1970s, *Trophies of Empire*. In the later iteration, named *Trophies of Empire #2*, the 'bullet' forms that occupy the shelved cabinet in the original are transformed into hand-carved wooden creatures, many placed on found trinkets and adorned with locks of human hair. This work demonstrates how, towards the end of his life, Locke increasingly merged the aesthetics of African American vernacular art with Caribbean mythology and his reflections on his own history as an artist.

Locke's legacy is often discussed alongside other diasporic artists such as Rasheed Araeen, who was shown at Ikon in 1987. How does Resistant Forms contribute to a broader conversation about overlooked or under-recognised postcolonial artists in Britain and beyond?

Rasheed Araeen included Locke's work in his landmark group exhibition 'The Other Story' at Hayward Gallery in 1989, alongside his Guyanese and British peers Frank Bowling and Aubrey Williams.

Regarding the contribution that 'Resistant Forms' makes to a broader conversation about under-recognised artists, firstly, I would question what exactly we mean by under-recognised. While it's true that 'Resistant Forms' is the first survey show of Locke's work since his passing in 2010, he did exhibit internationally throughout his life. Secondly, I hope the exhibition contributes to reframing the limits of what 'political' art can look like, emphasising how artists and forms that resist legibility can in fact be intensely political.

Lastly, having recently also co-curated a survey show of Donald Rodney's work together with Nicole Yip, I have given a lot of thought to how Rodney and other artists associated with the Black British Arts movement of the 1980s would have understood Locke's work, considering their age difference, the distinct sociopolitical context in which they were working, and the fact that their own work and cultural activism tended to be either more figurative or more directly political in tone. At the same time, I also have the impression that these artists are too often discussed as if they were a homogenous group, which couldn't be further from the truth.

And so, though it is always interesting to understand artists' influences, networks and affiliations, I also believe firmly in the importance of engaging with artists on their own terms. Though Locke was clearly profoundly inspired by many of the artists, writers and scholars he met in Guyana, the UK and the US, in the end, he still lived his own messy, meandering life. If his work teaches us anything, it's that we sometimes need to resist categorisation and accept the limits of our own understanding.

'Donald Locke: Resistant Forms' is on view at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, until 22 February 2026. Visit [Ikon Gallery](#) for more information.



Installation view of *Plantation* by Donald Locke in 'Resistant Forms' at Ikon Gallery, 2025. Courtesy of Ikon. Photo: Tom Bird.