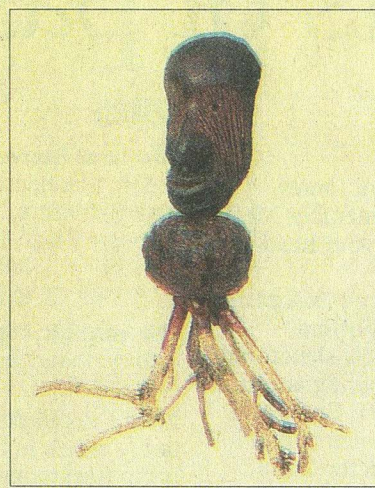


VISUAL ARTS

# the power of Locke



By CATHERINE FOX  
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Donald Locke grew up in Guyana, a small country next to Venezuela that was once a British colony. Like the rest of the Americas, his native land is a brew of European, African and native cultures. The art he makes is as creole as his background, and despite time spent in Britain and the U.S. Southwest, it always comes back to his roots.

This may be as oblique as a geographical reference in a title or as overt as his sculptures based on the subculture of Guyana's gold prospectors. Both are evident in Locke's one-man exhibition at City Gallery East, part of the gallery's ongoing Master Series, initiated to honor artists of longstanding distinction. Expertly installed by Atlanta artist Freddie Styles, the show encompasses work from 1991, when

**REVIEW**

**"Donald Locke: The Road to El Dorado"**

Through April 4. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays; 1-5 p.m. Saturdays. Price range: \$5,000-\$40,000. City Gallery East, 675 Ponce de Leon Ave. N.E. 404-817-7956.

**The verdict:** An engaging look at this artist's multifarious practice.

Locke moved to Atlanta, to the present, including monumental mixed-media paintings, collaged drawings and two bodies of sculpture.

Just as Locke, 72, continually returns to his past, he returns to certain images, forms and strategies in his paintings and drawings. Both are layered and mixed media, and black is the dominant color, a preference

Locke traces to the black-and-white illustrations in his elementary school readers and the black-and-white school of Guyanan artists.

The first impression of the paintings is the gestural black forms reminiscent of abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell's work, given extra presence and texture by the clay and straw mixed into the paint. An array of photocopied photographs — of Locke's own figurative sculpture, of passport- or yearbook-style photos of anonymous individuals taken from Guyanan newspapers and of black Americans such as bluesman Robert Johnson — are visible through washes of paint. The mix also includes photos of ritual phallic sculptures and modernist abstract ones. These images add visual texture to the compositions and transform the canvases into amalgams of free-floating memories.

Though striking from afar, the paintings are, to my mind, the least compelling objects of Locke's *oeuvre*. They give off a whiff of academia, a pastiche of popular art strategies. Drawings such as "Tree Dwellers of Monkey Mountain" (a rugged, isolated area of Guyana) use similar approaches to tighter, more personal, more aesthetically pleasing effect. In this series, a black tree forms a lacy surface, beneath which the collaged images are



Donald Locke's drawing "Tree Dwellers of Monkey Mountain" (above) and "Bush Die Die" (top), a totemic sculpture inspired by African-American vernacular art.

placed. Spots of red and blue, also found in many of the paintings, further enliven the drawings.

Sculpture may be Locke's strongest suit. He has long been involved in the human form, particularly the female nude, which he presents headless and often armless, with Gaston Lachaise amplitude but an African body type. "Three Sisters" features a trio of these figures, each with a different color patina: iridescent blue, iridescent rose and brown.

These have a strong presence, but Locke's most recent work, and the work most explicitly about Guyana, is his best yet. Inspired by the self-taught African-American artists whose work he saw in the 1996 Olympics exhibition "Souls Grown Deep," he began working with wax heads, originally intended to be cast

in bronze, in combination with sticks, twine, hair, feathers and whatnot. He created characters, archetypal prospectors — hapless men trying to strike it rich panning for gold in the Guyanan bush — and magical curios.

These are wonderful pieces, exerting a totemic power, and they become more potent presented in an ensemble. They bring together Locke's training, observations and life story, channeling African as well as vernacular sources. Brancusi is there, too, in the way Locke treats his sculptures' bases.

"You can't escape from what is imprinted in you," says Locke.

But sometimes an artist needs some distance to recognize it. As he says, "I had to leave to do this work."