

SITUATIONS PAPERS

A commissioned response to Hew Locke's *Ruined*, 2010

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Hew Locke
Ruined, 2010 (permanently sited)
Brunswick Cemetery Gardens, Bristol, UK

Ruined is a permanent public artwork by Hew Locke sited in an 18th century cemetery garden. The work consists of a series of cast iron grave markers, which have been fabricated using the artist's original designs and relate to the share certificates and historical documents of commercial companies, which no longer exist or have undergone transformation through takeovers, bankruptcy, nationalisation or other economic or political changes.

Brunswick Cemetery was established around 1770 and later, it became a Unitarian burial ground until 1963 when it became a public park. The gardens retain a number of historic features including monuments, boundary walls and a Georgian mortuary chapel. Since the mid 1980s, the cemetery has been used as a public park and, following extensive re-landscaping in 2010, is now known as Brunswick Cemetery Gardens.

For *Ruined*, Hew Locke overlaid the company information from historical documents with other forms such as drips, slashes and shrouds, and casts from objects such as cheap jewellery. In some cases, these layers obscure the underlying information and in others, draw our attention to it. Some of the companies will be well known locally for their connections to Bristol's trade history, whilst others tell of more recent global events. *Ruined* points to the inevitable stories of rise and fall underpinning our economy and the boom and bust of global trade.

*The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour:-
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*

Thomas Gray, 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', 1783

Commemorating the historic cycles of global trade, *Ruined* is an artwork which stands as a sobering reminder of the fragility of economic power. Commissioned in 2009 to create an artwork which would contribute to the renewal of Brunswick Cemetery Gardens, artist Hew Locke was initially intrigued by the melancholic associations of the disused cemetery. The fragments of monuments and dedications partially concealed beneath layers of bindweed and ivy naturally brought to mind the metaphorical elegies of the Graveyard and Romantic poets – such as Gray's infamous poem written just a decade after Brunswick Cemetery was built.

In some respects, Locke's first impulse was to work with the most striking structures of the cemetery – the Georgian mortuary chapel or boundary wall – and yet, the artist was tentative about indulging in the nostalgic associations of the 18th century Unitarian burial ground to the detriment of the contemporary richness of the surrounding area.

In use as a public park since 1963, Brunswick Cemetery is located in St. Pauls, an area of Bristol bounded by the architecture of the slave trade, infused by a vivid and dynamic cultural life epitomised by street art, carnival and the local music scene and drawn taught by the tensions prevalent in any urban area. Locke's work draws upon this complex set of conditions, but indirectly so. He places us as inadvertent 'mourners' at the point at which historical and contemporary systems of power bear upon a local context, but in doing so, once he has grounded us in the fabric of the Brunswick cemetery, he directs our attention outwards to the international implications of this place and this time.

Locke is well known for his exploration of the visual language of power and authority, from his reconfigurations of royal portraiture to his most recent proposal for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar

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of Field Marshal, Sir George White, which is drenched with horse-brasses, charms, medals, sabres, ex-votos, jewels, Bactrian treasure and Hellenistic masks.

In *Ruined*, Locke's first permanent public artwork, the exuberant forms and colours of these sculptural works and propositions are exchanged for a sombre, though none less intricately worked, visual form. Here, Locke has produced ten cast iron grave markers commemorating commercial companies which have ceased trading or undergone radical transformation. The outline forms, visual imagery and texts on each marker are drawn from historical documents such as share certificates. In turn, this information was overlaid with other forms such as drips, slashes and shrouds, and casts from objects such as cheap jewellery, partially obscuring or heightening the surface detail prior to casting.

Locke draws us into a compelling process of deciphering the information, intentionally obscuring, or in some cases obliterating, certain details. Though cryptic, the partial evidence is enough to set off a potent set of associations. Behind the confident typography of company names such as W.D. & H.O. WILLS, THE WEST INDIES SUGAR CORPORATION, THE PERSIAN BANK MINING RIGHTS CORPORATION, PAN AM AIRLINES and ENRON lie stories of dramatic takeovers and bankruptcy. The inclusion of the Society of Merchant Venturers and Ducrow's Circus clearly refer directly to Bristol's past - the former with direct connections to the slave trade, the latter a reference to one of the city's first equestrian schools on the nearby Backfields site. But their inclusion also alludes to the persistence of historical forms in contemporary Bristol. The Merchant Venturers continues as a society which promotes the city's commercial interests, whilst the historical architecture associated with their trade interests are now home to the decidedly non-conformist Circomedia and the Bristol Do performance festival.

In *Ruined*, Locke uses the visual language of the cemetery to create a work which resonates strikingly at a time of acute economic uncertainty. The work reveals itself slowly, demanding careful study and further research to uncover what lies beneath.

Biography

Claire Doherty is Director of Situations and Senior Research Fellow in Fine Art at The University of the West of England.

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