

The Post and Courier

Artist Steve Locke to discuss public monuments in Gibbes Museum lecture

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Artist Steve Locke is this year's speaker in the Gibbes Museum's Distinguished Lecture Series, set for 6 p.m. Nov. 3 at the Sottile Theatre. Liza Voll Photography/Provided

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In April 2015, Freddie Gray was arrested by Baltimore police and badly injured during transport. The 25-year-old African American man died a week later. Six officers were charged with crimes ranging from illegal arrest to second-degree “depraved-heart” murder. None were convicted.

The following year, artist Steve Locke secured a fellowship at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, where he was invited to create a large-scale mural. Freddie Gray was on his mind.

Locke determined to make a memorial.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Gibbes Museum's Distinguished Lecture Series, featuring Steve Locke on monuments

WHEN: 6 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 3

WHERE: Sottile Theatre, 44 George St.

COST: \$15-\$60 live; \$10 virtual

MORE INFO: For details, go to <https://bit.ly/3156w1C>. For tickets, click the "Register Now" button on that page. Social distancing will be practiced. Masks and proof of vaccination or negative COVID test are required at the theater.

The project inspired Locke to think hard about the purpose and use of public monuments. He will share his insights at the Sottile Theatre on Nov. 3 when he delivers a talk titled "Memory in the Built Form." Locke is this year's featured artist in the Gibbes Museum's annual Distinguished Lecture Series.

For the Gardner Museum, he created a large abstract piece mounted on an exterior wall of the museum building. The artist selected three photographs of Gray that had appeared in the media: one of the man on a street corner, another being arrested and another when he was on life support in the hospital.

He averaged the pixels of each image to create monochromes then made a fabric print that represented a kind of timeline: life, suffering, death.

"Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie (A Memorial for Freddie Gray)" was a new kind of public monument, a response not only to the treatment of Gray at the hands of the police, but to the repeated scenes of brutality, broadcast on television, that he has been forced to endure.

"It's very upsetting to be a Black person and see this over and over again," he said.

Monuments have a function quite different from that of public art, he said. They are not really meant to decorate the environment, but rather to help us remember certain figures or events. *When* they are installed is key.

Take, for example, the majority of Confederate monuments, which were erected during the decades when white supremacy was reasserted after the Reconstruction period, and again in response to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s.

Their purpose, evident by the timing, was to intimidate Black people, Locke said. The public debate over these monuments indicate that a growing number of Americans “are starting to be unhappy about the lie,” he said. “Those lies are getting people killed.”



Counterprotesters at the Confederate soldiers' memorial in White Point Garden confront social justice activists across the street on June 14, 2020. File/Sta

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Locke is proposing other monuments meant to correct omissions and distortions. One is a large footprint of a slave auction block that would be embedded in the pavement of Boston's Faneuil Hall, the site of public meetings and protests that date back to the Revolutionary War. The building was named for Peter Faneuil, the son of French Huguenots and a merchant who gained enormous wealth partly because of his involvement in the slave trade.

Locke wants his slave auction block to be heated to 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, the normal temperature of a human being. He wants to create a time capsule.

"The notion is that when you are in that spot, you are transported to the past," he said. "It makes history immediate."

The project has not yet been approved.

Fostering dialogue

Angela Mack, director of the Gibbes Museum, said Locke's lecture is part of a larger effort to foster public dialogue about monuments and history. Mack served as vice chairwoman of the history and culture subcommittee of the Special Commission on Equity, Inclusion, and Racial Conciliation that was set up by the city of Charleston in 2020. Commission members spent about a year examining issues facing the community and generating 150 recommendations for reforming public education, economic development, policing, public expression of culture and history, and more — all in pursuit of social justice.

The commission's report provoked some fierce opposition, and the effort to establish a new, permanent commission has faltered. Critics tended to focus on the recommendations to pursue a reparations program, embrace critical race theory and include The New York Times' 1619 Project in classrooms. They called the report "divisive" and some opponents admonished City Council members to reject it outright.

Mack said a lot of work went into the report, and into compiling its many recommendations. Locke’s work is interpretive and nuanced, and his interest in monuments and memorials made him a perfect speaker for the lecture series, and for the larger dialogue underway in Charleston, she said.

His talk will be held at the Sottile Theatre and livestreamed on the internet. While he is in Charleston — his first visit to the Holy City, he said — he will participate in a virtual learning session with civic leaders and meet with emerging artists.

“I think his work exposes vulnerability (and fosters) conversation about social and sexual and historical issues,” Mack said. “That’s what’s cool about it. What we hope is possible is to somewhat diffuse the polarization about monuments and create a real conversation as opposed to a screaming match.”

Locke, 58, was born in Cleveland and grew up in Detroit during a period of Black autonomy and economic diversity.

“It was beautiful when I was a kid,” he said.

In his neighborhood alone, he knew Black doctors and grocers and plumbers and artists.

“It never occurred to me that there was anything wrong with Black people.”



Artist Steve Locke is reimagining what public monuments can do. Provided

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As a kid, he would walk by the Hostess factory and get cupcakes to eat on the way to school. Hitsville USA, the headquarters of Motown, was around the block. He played basketball in the driveway of Gladys Knight's house.

"It was a city full of excellence," he said, recalling how he assumed that was the norm for Black people.

His father worked on the line at Chrysler. His mother supported his artistic inclinations. They wanted him to get educated and do well in life.

Sometimes he skipped school to visit the Detroit Institute of Arts where he marveled at Diego Rivera's famous Detroit Industry murals, a giant fresco series and monument to ingenuity.

And it hasn't quite worked out the way Rivera's masterpiece, with its emphasis on people power, suggested it might. One panel is devoted to the promise of vaccinations. Another to the dangerous science of nuclear weapons. Human strength and persistence suggest technological triumph even as the money managers fret about expenses and profits.

"He was positing a future when we would eradicate disease and poverty through the miracle of industry," Locke said. "I look at that now with a sense of loss, because all that stuff is gone. Now we live in the future."

And it isn't Rivera's hopeful future.



A crew of workers surveys the debris from the pedestal of the John C. Calhoun monument after it was pulled down in Marion Square on Aug. 26, 2020, in Charleston. The city of Charleston removed the statue itself in June. File/Gavin McIntyre/Sta

BY GAVIN MCINTYRE GMCINTYRE@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

‘Just say what they are’

Confederate statues can be found in many cities and towns throughout South Carolina. Charleston features four: a monument to the “Confederate Defenders of Charleston” at White Point Garden; to Gen. Pierre Beauregard in Washington Square; to Confederate poet Henry Timrod in Washington Square; and to various battles fought during the “War Between the States,” inscribed on the Washington Monument, also in the square.

About 10 streets in the city are named for Confederate leaders. And Marion Square features a monument to Wade Hampton, who was a slave-holding planter, Confederate officer and politician who helped restore White rule after Reconstruction.

A war memorial in Mount Pleasant's Waterfront Park pays tribute to Confederate soldiers who died in the "War Between the States."

In June 2020, the John C. Calhoun monument was removed by the city from Marion Square after 130 years of occasional protest and debate.

Calhoun, a statesman of enormous accomplishment, was a staunch defender of slavery and an articulate proponent of white supremacy. Defenders of the monuments say removing them is akin to erasing history. Critics say they are offensive distortions of history. Locke doesn't much care what happens to them, he said.

"Take them down or don't take them down, just say what they are," he said. "What matters is to be honest about the purpose and origin of these things" — to recognize that these statues glorify an ideology that directly threatens Black people.

Much of his work now contains a social critique.

"A Partial List of Unarmed African-Americans who were Killed by Police or who Died in Police Custody During my Sabbatical from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, 2014-2015" includes 262 names.

"Family Pictures" portrays the state-sponsored violence with which Black people in America have always contended.

"#Killers" presents small portraits of White people who have killed Black people and, in so doing, creates a memorial to the impunity of whiteness.

Now, he will continue interrogating the ways society channels the past, striving to fill in the gaps and provide a fresh point of view. Making monuments is a good way to do that, he said.



Locke created three paint colors representing stages in the life of Freddie Gray, who died in police custody in Baltimore in 2015. Provided

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