

Artist Steve Locke awarded Rappaport Prize by deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum

The museum's artistic director, Jessica May, calls Locke 'an essential artist of our time.'

By [Malcolm Gay](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 25, 2022



Artist Steve Locke has won the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum's Rappaport Prize. ROSS COLLAB

Few contemporary artists have left Boston under such public, or such fraught, circumstances as Steve Locke.

The artist, whose work probes questions of racial terror, male desire, and violence, had established his career here, teaching, making, and exhibiting art over the course of decades. A

MassArt graduate, he was a fixture in the city's gallery scene, later producing high-profile works for the Boston Public Library and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

But when the Boston chapter of the NAACP opposed Locke's most ambitious work — a proposed memorial that would have implicated Faneuil Hall's namesake in the trans-Atlantic slave trade — his love for the city grew more complicated. Locke ultimately withdrew the proposal and, in 2019, decamped for a teaching job in New York, a painful episode for the artist, whose abandoned project remains a cause célèbre for some in the art world.

Now, Locke's artistic impact on the area is being recognized by the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, which has awarded him this year's Rappaport Prize. The honor, which "celebrates the achievement and potential of an artist who has demonstrated significant creativity and vision," comes with a \$50,000 cash award, an increase over previous years.

Jessica May, artistic director at the deCordova, described Locke as "an essential artist of our time."

"So many of us have admired the ways in which Steve's art brings together multiple vectors of cultural discourse — layering art history and the history of racialized violence," she said in a statement. His "art has increasingly changed my understanding of American history and our cultural and political environment today."

Reached at his studio in upstate New York, Locke said he was "completely unprepared for it, but I'm absolutely thrilled."

"I'm in a place right now in my life where my work is really starting to expand — not just conceptually, but physically," said Locke, who taught for years at MassArt. "This really came at the perfect time."

It also comes as Locke's work, which spans painting, sculpture, and installations, is gaining broader recognition. He received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2020. He is now a professor at Pratt Institute, and he recently signed with Alexander Gray Associates in New York, where he'll open a solo show of figurative works this October.

Locke, 59, is perhaps best known for his portraiture, an art form that has traditionally conferred a sense of power or dignity upon its subjects. Locke's pictures, however, subvert those expectations.

His ongoing series of drawings and paintings, "when you're a boy..." is more diaristic, presenting his male subjects as vulnerable, lewd, cruel, or tremulous. Some are shown with veiled, desirous gazes; others appear menacing; still more are shown nude or in frank sexual acts. Similarly, his first solo museum show, 2013's "there is no one left to blame" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, featured paintings of men with their tongues out.

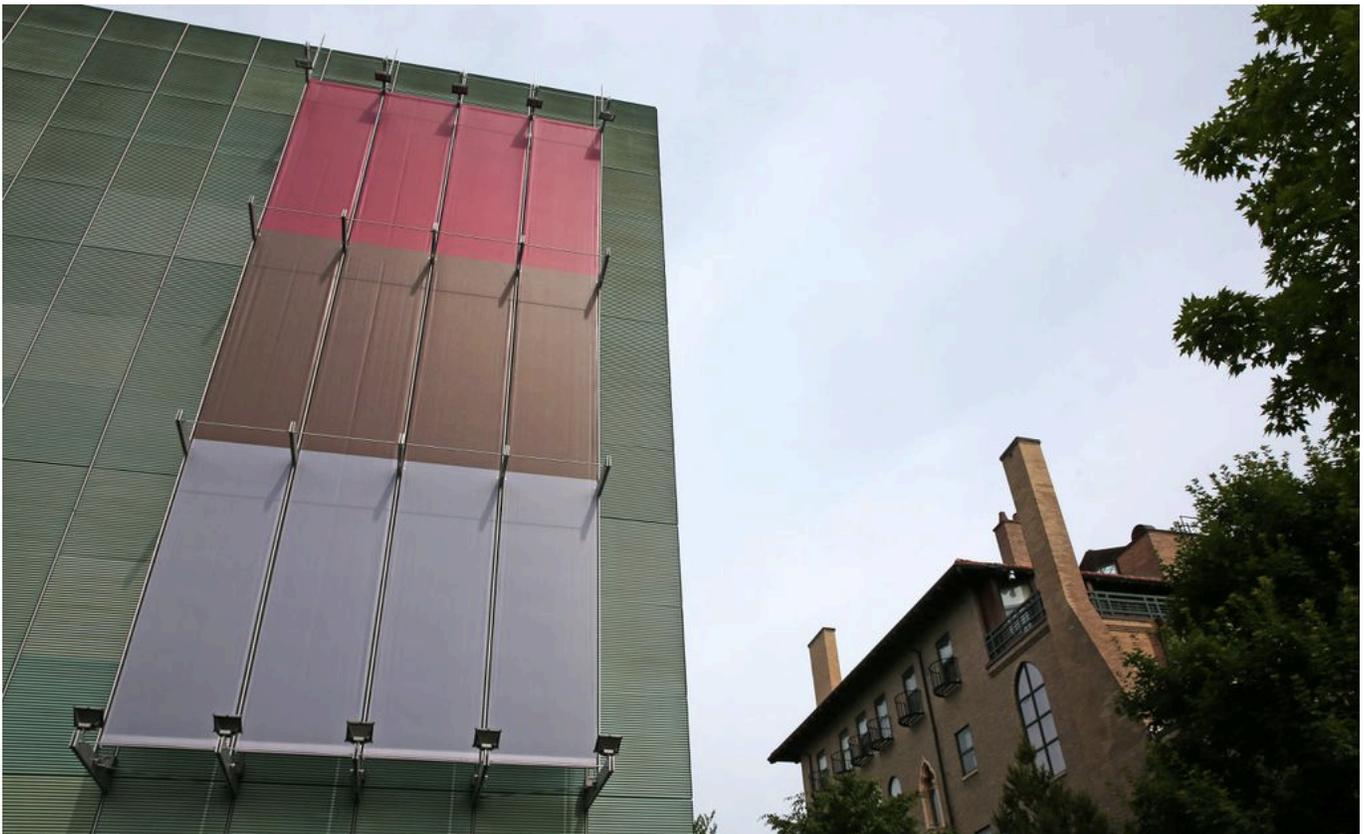
But Locke's work underwent a transformation following the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, Black men whose deaths at the hands of police were widely publicized, including grotesque images of the victims' dead or dying bodies.

"It was a response to seeing Black people killed on television, like, when did that become okay,"

said Locke. “It started me thinking about absence in a different way, not just loss, but absence. And how do you make a work that is about a person without imaging a person?”

In one series of drawings, “#Killers,” Locke created portraits of people who’ve killed Black people. In another series, “Family Pictures,” Locke placed historical images of lynchings, slave ships, and other instances of racial terror in off-the-shelf photo frames that bear saccharine mottos such as, “Who wouldn’t want to be us?” and “always and forever.”

But it was Locke’s 2018 work, “Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie (A Memorial for Freddie Gray),” that brought this vein of work to a wider public. Installed on the facade of the Gardner Museum, the abstract portrait consisted of three fields of color, stacked vertically, which Locke had created by averaging pixels from three widely circulated photos of Gray.



Steve Locke's abstract portrait "Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie (A Memorial for Freddie Gray)" installed on the facade of the Gardner Museum in 2018. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

“It was his shift into the public sphere,” said Dina Deitsch, director and chief curator of the Tufts University Art Galleries.

Deitsch, who served on the panel of jurors that selected Locke for this year’s Rappaport Prize, called “Three Deliberate Grays” a “game-changer” for the artist.

“He’s such a painter’s painter,” she said. “So for him to kind of merge that with an incredibly accessible and powerful political statement for the side of a building, I mean, that was impressive.”

That same year, Locke proposed a memorial that would have publicly acknowledged that Peter Faneuil, the 18th-century Boston merchant, had participated in and profited from the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The ground-level bronze plate, approximating the size of an auction block, was to be embedded in the cobblestone outside Faneuil Hall and heated to a constant 98.6 degrees — a subtle yet undeniable reminder that some portion of Boston’s historic wealth derived from human bondage.

But the proposal, which grew out of an artist’s residency with the city, quickly became controversial as the local NAACP and other Black activists registered their opposition to the idea.

“I saw my work being weaponized in order to promote the notion that the City did not care about having an engaged dialogue about race, that I was the ‘house negro’ pawn of a white mayor,” Locke wrote in a 2019 opinion piece, explaining his decision to withdraw the proposal. “My repeating that none of this was true was not enough to reframe the dialogue.”

Three years later, Locke is still clearly pained by the episode, which he called “a very lonely time.”

“It broke me,” he said, adding that many of the city’s white public art advocates fell silent amid the controversy. “The problem is, there’s such a small number of Black people in Boston that white people think that any Black person with a sign is Martin Luther King.”

Today, the project has taken on a new life via Locke’s series “Homage to the Auction Block,” paintings that play on Bauhaus artist Josef Albers’s well-known series “Homage to the Square.”

“His work compels us to confront our past and examine our future while facilitating discourse and self-reflection,” Phyllis Rappaport, whose namesake Phyllis and Jerome Lyle Rappaport Foundation funds the award, said in a statement. “He is a force.”

As part of the prize, Locke will present a free lecture at the deCordova in the spring of 2023.

“Hand to God: I never expected anybody to be interested in anything I ever did,” said Locke. “I didn’t become an artist to become famous or to get rich. I didn’t have any other plan. I just wanted to be an artist, you know? And to get this kind of recognition when you’re alive is really — it’s a massive thing.”