

The Boston Globe

An artist's vision of where racial violence meets the American dream of home

By Cate McQuaid October 30, 2016



Steve Locke's "school of love & Family Pictures" is a two-part exhibition up at Samson and Gallery Kayafas. Below: plaster painted faun heads part of the exhibits.

In the summer of 2014, Steve Locke was savoring the early days of a sabbatical from his job as an assistant professor at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. He planned to spend his time painting, reading, and resting. Then Darren Wilson, a white police officer, shot 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., the first of a cascade of police assaults on black men caught on video. Locke watched the violence play out on television. It began to seep into his work. "Steve Locke: school of love & Family Pictures," a two-part exhibition now up at Samson and Gallery Kayafas, features art that sprang from that period.

As an African-American gay man, Locke, 53, had spent his life tuned to undercurrents and overt expressions of racism and homophobia. He grew up in Detroit, the son of an auto worker and a Medicaid billing clerk; his father died when he was 9.

“We didn’t call it ‘gay’ then,” he says, “I knew that being a ‘queer’ or a ‘fag’ was bad, so I didn’t want to be that.”

He accepted his sexuality as a student at Boston University in the 1980s, and came out in the early days of the AIDS epidemic. When he and some others tried to organize a gay and lesbian group at BU, the administration resisted, Locke says, claiming “there aren’t any gay people at BU.”

Maybe in part because Locke grew up believing he had something to hide, he did not draw attention to himself or seek trouble. Then again, as a black man, he’s always had to be extra careful.

“I’ve organized my whole life to do nothing with the police,” he says. “I keep receipts that show where I was when. I don’t speed, I don’t jaywalk.”

For “Family Pictures,” a chillingly effective photo exhibit at Gallery Kayafas, Locke put old images of lynchings and black servitude in frames inscribed with cozy familial sentiments, and photographed them on a coffee table against backgrounds painted with homey tones.

One has a picture of a hanged black man surrounded by white men, posing proudly like hunters with their prey.

“It’s not where you go or what you do, it’s who is beside you that counts,” reads its frame. “I don’t think the sentiments on the frames are different from those of the people who posed for the picture,” Locke says. “They are images to reinforce notions of superiority. Nobody in these pictures thinks they did anything wrong.” “Here are images of horrible violence, a spectacle, that are framed in familiar family frames signifying something more intimate,” says Henriette Huldish, curator at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. “In a large-format photograph, conceptually restrained. It reminds you of other photographers with a removed gaze, yet the image here is so disturbing.”

Locke draws a parallel between the lynching pictures — many of which were made into postcards — and the television images of black men being killed.

In an essay in *Hyperallergic*, the online art magazine, Locke compares the broadcast of such footage to violent videos that were withheld, in which white people are the victims. When two television reporters were killed on camera in 2015, he writes, “Immediately, the television station, Facebook, and other social media erupt with requests for people not to view or share the video.”

“People see Eric Garner murdered on television over and over again,” Locke says. “How is that different than lynching photos? They are documents of racial terror.” In 2014, Garner died after a New York police officer put him in a chokehold.

The artist suggests that a sense of safety at home — more than that, an ideal of white domesticity — twines inextricably with violence

“We didn’t see what happened to Trayvon Martin, but we’ve seen all these others,” Locke says. “And the result is, ‘I can kill him. I felt unsafe.’” Martin was the Florida teenager shot and killed by neighborhood-watch volunteer George Zimmerman in 2012.

The artist himself was stopped by police last December and questioned in an attempted break-in. Rattled, he wrote a blog post about it that went viral. “A lot of this work is in response to that experience,” he says. “Family Pictures” makes a needle-sharp point. The broader, more philosophical project “school of love,” sometimes sweet and sometimes painful, considers what Locke has learned about love and identity.

The show is a rare collaboration between commercial galleries. Samson represents Locke; when he showed up with two bodies of work, he and Samson owner Camilo Alvarez approached Arlette Kayafas, owner of Gallery Kayafas and a friend of Locke’s.

“Before Camilo could ask, I said, ‘Why not show these at the same time?’” says Kayafas. “Both bodies of work had to be seen together. Together, here we are, you can’t avoid [the subject of racism] in any way.” In “school of love,” all-white paintings of men line one wall. Dozens of painted plaster faun heads fill the gallery in front of them.

It’s Locke’s most personal show. He’s best known for his paintings of men, many with their tongues sticking out, examining masculinity and vulnerability. They filled a big museum wall in his solo show at the Institute of Contemporary Art, in 2013.

The faun heads represent students, Locke says, and the paintings are teachers. The students might be aspects of the artist’s personality. The teachers shaped him by seeing him in certain ways. As an African-American gay man, Locke has been the subject of many projections, from fearful to altruistic. One painting, titled “Monsignor,” refers to his education in Detroit at a Jesuit high school, which he remembers fondly. Next to it screens a grainy video of a preacher giving a viciously homophobic sermon.

“So cruel,” Locke says. “I grew up with that.” He found the faun bust in an antique shop in Maine. “The guy in the store said, ‘I don’t mean to be rude, but that kind of looks like you,’” Locke recalls. “I’ve had it for years. I wanted to put myself back in the work, and I thought, ‘I can use this head.’”

He made plaster casts and slathered sharp colors over them. Some hang from bungee cords, echoing the lynching pictures. Many have nails driven into them, like a certain power idol made in Africa’s Congo Basin.

“When they were all in my house, it was like a little army of me on my basement floor,” Locke says. Maybe he needs — or deserves — an internal army to contend with the prejudices he sees and experiences each day. “James Baldwin said to be black and conscious is to walk around in a state of rage all the time,” Locke says. “My saving grace is my ability to make things.”

Steve Locke: school of love & Family Pictures

At Samson and Gallery Kayafas, 450 Harrison Ave., through Nov. 26. 617-357-7177