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Installation at the Gardner honors the ‘unfinished business’ of Freddie Gray

By **Graham Ambrose** Globe Correspondent, June 28, 2018, 5:27 p.m.



In April 2015, a 25-year-old Baltimore resident named Freddie Gray died after suffering a spinal injury in the back of a police van. His death, ruled a homicide, prompted weeks of protests, violent riots, and a national reckoning over police conduct and racial injustice.

Freddie Gray was black. But “Freddie Gray #1” is magenta, “Freddie Gray #2” is brown, and “Freddie Gray #3” is silver.

They’re the three pigments created by Boston artist Steve Locke for “Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie (A Memorial for Freddie Gray),” his new installation on the facade of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

“It’s a memorial, a place to remember, a place to mourn,” said Locke, an associate professor at Massachusetts College of Art and Design and a 2016 artist-in-residence at the Gardner. “Someone was murdered on our television, and we never got to have any sort of moment. Are we supposed to forget about that guy?”

The installation — overlooking Evans Way Park, near the museum entrance — is massive, rectangular, and divided horizontally into three even sections: the top third, magenta; the middle, brown; and the bottom, silver.

Locke created the colors by averaging the hues from three widely circulated photos of Gray. The magenta, based on a portrait shot, represents Gray’s life. The brown, from a photo of his arrest, remembers his suffering. The silver, from an image of Gray on life support in the hospital, evokes his death.

The trichrome portrait is abstract and enigmatic, at once a vivid display of beauty and a somber spot for mourning. “The notion that something is wonderful and horrible at the same time is baked into the human experience,” Locke said. “The simple action of trying to make an image of Freddie Gray that’s not him being tortured, traumatized, or erased was really the crux of the challenge.”

To Pieranna Cavalchini, curator of contemporary art at the Gardner, the installation is “a catalyst for conversation,” one that advances Isabella Stewart Gardner’s commitment to public discourse.

“It’s a public-facing space for public art,” she said. “Museums are a venue for an open discourse over community issues. The collection is alive.” Though Boston continues to struggle with racial inequality and segregation, Locke said the city “is really trying to address” its problems with race. The memorial aims to spark introspection but not necessarily to point fingers.

“We understand that people will react in different ways and from different points of views,” said Peggy Fogelman, the museum’s director. “Art has always had something important to say about the society around it.” She added that the board of trustees was “very supportive” of the piece.

Locke, who grew up in Detroit, the son of an autoworker, became an artist because “it was the only thing I could do,” he said. His work is known for its depictions of masculinity. He said that curators at the Gardner approached him in January about the facade installation. After some thought, he chose to memorialize Freddie Gray, whose death he saw as “unfinished business.”

“The museum is a place not just for contemplating beautiful things — although that’s really important — it’s also a way to demonstrate what we value,” Locke said. “We’re showing you these things because we think they’re important.”

The installation will be on display until January 21. Locke will discuss on Sept. 13 at 5:15 p.m. in the museum’s Living Room.

“Color forces you to associate. You have to name an object in the world in order to help you understand what that color is,” Locke said. “So when someone walks by and they look at that color and they ask, ‘What is that?’ I can say, ‘It’s Freddie Gray.’ ”