

**The Boston Globe**

## **The nearly erased artist behind the hidden face of the proposed Faneuil Hall memorial**

By **Adrian Walker** Globe Columnist, August 21, 2018



Steve Locke (pictured with one of his past exhibits) is an African-American artist, who is also one of the city of Boston's current artists-in-residence. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2016

Steve Locke sat in a tranquil museum courtyard the other day and pondered a controversy of which he never thought he would be a part.

"I'm really new at making public art works," Locke said. "I was sort of hoping for an informed and intelligent conversation, but that isn't the conversation that's come out."

Locke is an African-American artist, who is also one of the city of Boston's current artists-in-residence. In January, he wrote an intriguing proposal for an installation addressing the tragic origins of Faneuil Hall, a gift from a merchant — Peter Faneuil — who made part of his fortune from the slave trade.

At the time Locke made his proposal, he was unaware that there was a campaign to rename Faneuil Hall. But his idea — which has been embraced by City Hall — has collided head-on with the protests to rename the space. On social media, particularly, Locke has been denounced for somehow undermining the notion of stripping the slave trader's name from the landmark, and accused of providing political cover to Mayor Martin J. Walsh.

Those charges are fact-free, but they open a window into what sometimes passes for political discourse in this town. He's right: We should be having a debate over how to come to terms with Boston's Colonial (and slave-connected) history. Instead, it has immediately degenerated into a food fight over who is in the pocket of whom. Whatever dialogue Boston needs to have about race, it isn't that.

I wanted to talk to Locke because the artist behind the monument idea is in danger of being overshadowed in a political war he isn't part of.

Locke, 55, has had gallery shows in multiple cities, and is a man whose art has long been devoted to protest. A case in point: The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is currently the site of an installation of Locke's that is devoted to the death of Freddie Gray, an African-American man who died while in police custody in Baltimore in 2015.

"I wish I was the happy artist who painted happy things, but that's just never been my thing," Locke said.

He was raised in Detroit, and came to Boston, at 16, to attend Boston University. He went on to earn two degrees at Massachusetts College of Art and Design and is now on the faculty there. Along the way, Locke fell in love with Boston.

Faneuil Hall drew his interest because he believes this city, so steeped in history, has turned a blind eye to the way it was shaped, in the Colonial era, by the illicit riches of the trade in enslaved people.

Locke's proposed memorial would evoke a slave auction, with one ground-level bronze plate reflecting an auctioneer; a much larger one representing people trafficked in slavery. That plate measuring 10 feet by 16 feet would include a map showing the route traveled by people and goods between Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. It would be heated to 98.6 degrees — the temperature of the human body — reflecting the humanity of the people sold as chattel.

That hardly sounds like a feel-good proposal meant to quiet debate.

But the criticism of Locke's proposal isn't about art — it's about politics. In one missive to supporters, Kevin Peterson, who is leading the call to rename Faneuil Hall, claimed that "no black leader" had asked for a slave memorial at Faneuil Hall. Who is he to proclaim who gets to propose things?

We can — and should — debate the merits of Locke's ideas. But it shouldn't be a debate over who gets to have ideas, or who gets to call himself a "leader."

For Locke, it is the racially charged nature of the criticism that surprises and wounds him. His critics, to his mind, don't understand that his is not the world of politics.

"I'm not making my work for black people," Locke said. "I'm making my work for Boston — black and white. I'm making work to help my city heal."