

Boston Painter Steve Locke: 'It's My Job To Bear Witness To My Time'

Greg Cook July 30, 2013



Steve Locke (Greg Cook)

"If you're going to make paintings you have to up the ante about what painting can be," says Boston artist Steve Locke, whose exhibit "there is no one left to blame" opens at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art on July 31 and continues through October 27.

The show features his roughly rendered portraits of guys — their bodies, their faces, often sticking out their tongues. Locke says war and terrorism, masculinity and gay life, prejudice against African Americans and women are among the topics on his mind. Of late, he's taken to mounting many of his paintings atop vertical pipes, which he describes, in part, as a metaphor for wounded bodies requiring prosthetic limbs.

"My mother said to me once that she believed that God made artists to show people that he wants them to see," Locke says. "I hold onto that. So I feel like if there is a God — and I don't know, I'm not saying there is or there isn't, I'm just not a person of faith — but if there is one, it's my job to bear witness to my time. That's what I try to do in all my work."

The 50-year-old grew up in Detroit. He came here in the 1980s to study at Boston University and then Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston, where he now teaches.

This is his first solo museum show, he says. It's something of a milestone for the ICA as well. Though the museum has in recent years exhibited New York-based artists who teach here or went to school here or grew up here, this seems to be the first solo show by an artist living in Greater Boston inside the ICA since 2004. Locke says, though, "I think I just live in Boston. I don't think I'm a Boston artist."

I spoke with Locke last week about the show. Here's our conversation, lightly edited.



Steve Locke "the rising up," 2013. (Courtesy of the artist and Samson, Boston)

"It's hard to think of someone as powerful when their tongue is hanging out of their mouth. That might be an indication of lust or stupidity or absent-mindedness. I stick my tongue out when I'm concentrating on something. It's something I've done since I was a child. I don't know what it is. It's a nervous habit. But it's something that goes against this sort of intact, whole, contained representation of men that's the hallmark of portraiture."

"I could make a very safe body of work. I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to make work that surprised me. That was in dialogue with the work that is around me. I think the daring thing is for me, as someone who is known as a 'painter,' is to make things that people don't really understand as painting. That's the **f**irst and most obvious thing. Then the second thing is to really think about, well, how much do I have to paint? Do I have to paint the whole body? Do I have to paint someone I know? This is a geeky personal understanding of how things work. When you walk into a gallery, don't sometimes you walk in and you think I've seen this work before. What is at stake in this work? And for me I ask myself that question in the studio all the time."

"You turn on the news or you walk down the street, it's a pretty horrible time politically. We've been at war for the past 15 years. People are blown apart right in our own city. The body isn't this intact perfect thing. People have to deal with changes in the physical landscape and the political landscape. There's a huge assault against the rights of black people in this country, the rights of women in this country. So a lot of that stuff comes out in the work, I feel. And I think it's really urgent right now."

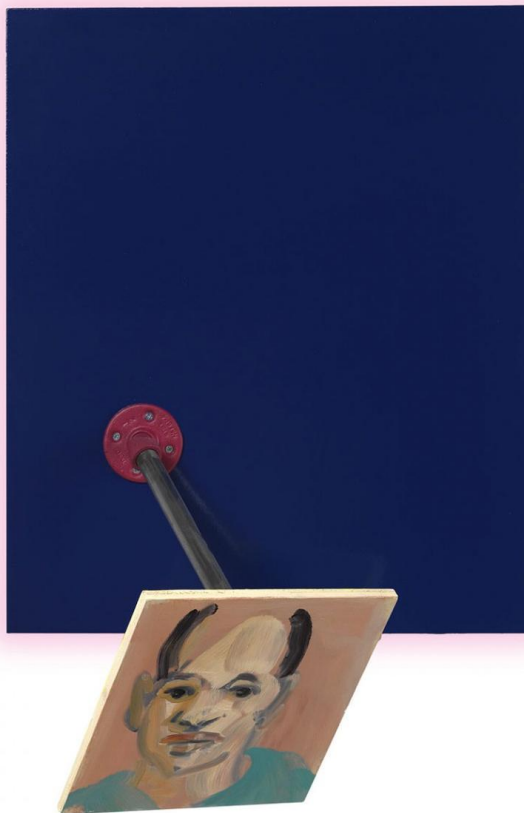


Steve Locke "there is no one left to blame," 2005-2013. (Courtesy of the artist and Samson, Boston)

"If you think about your body, right, what would you do without your legs? What would you do without them? And you think about the way the support of a painting is the wall. Just in a very basic way if you take away that support, what kind of new support do you have to have in order to make a presence? That's a very simple, one-to-one relationship with that metaphorical thinking versus the painterly thinking."

"How do you make an image of a man that talks about power, but also talks about vulnerability? And not to do the obvious thing like painting them like women or painting them naked or painting them demasculinized. That's not the project. It's to really talk about another moment, a sort of interstitial moment between whole and being in parts or between being available and being unavailable or being present and being absent."

"I do feel that as a gay person I have a long history of being engaged in what constitutes masculinity—I'd say that gay men are the caretakers of masculinity; it's their project—and how it sort of trickles down into other aspects of society. I've always been interested in that. But I don't think that think my paintings are especially about my sexual orientation, although I think that only someone of my sexual orientation could make them because I'm paying attention to things that straight people wouldn't pay attention to. It's like any other oppressed group. I think I know more about what straight people do because I pay attention to it. And I have to navigate a world that's run by straight people sometimes to my detriment and sometimes to my personal and political elimination. And it's the same thing with being black. I have to live in a world, I have to know more about the codes of how white people understand the world than white people do because to violate them you could end up dead."



Steve Locke "in place of the sun," 2009-2013. (Courtesy of the artist and Samson, Boston)

"It's really the reason why oil paint was made, to paint **f**lesh. That was my biggest draw in being able to make paintings. It's fun because you think that you can't do it. You look at someone's skin and everybody's skin is so different and the color is so different. The challenge of mixing this material to turn into **f**lesh, because that's the thing. It's not just a depiction of **f**lesh, it actually sometimes feels like the real thing. And that's when you say, 'Wooh, I did a really good job.' That's why I could never be any other kind of painter. I tried to be an abstract painter, I tried to do all sorts of stuff, but you know what, it's about the body, baby, bring it back to that."

"The Pilgrim' ... Originally in that painting the eyes were open. I kept trying to **f**igure out the color of the eyes and what they were looking at. I think I got back from London and the painting was on a shelf of all the paintings that are in progress. I pulled it out and I was looking at it. I sanded maybe 80 percent of it off and just **l**eft the eyes. Then I repainted the painting outward and painted out the eyes as the last thing. So it took me maybe four years to realize that that painting should have had its eyes closed and once the eyes were closed then the rest of the painting just happened. Thinking about encountering the gaze of an object, it's an illusion because the painting can't see you, but the painting has eyes. I thought in the act of painting it that it wasn't about the image being available to the viewer. Closing the eyes was a way to present the illusion of a sealed off presence. Someone who didn't know they were being looked at, who was maybe engaged in some sort of ecstatic moment. This going to sound really crazy, but the personage in the painting needed their privacy. It took me years to **f**igure that out. That that painting was not about a public engagement, it was about a private connection."



Steve Locke "a brief history," 2005-2013. (Courtesy of the artist and Samson, Boston)



Steve Locke "loving the alien," 2004-2013. (Courtesy of the artist and Samson, Boston)