

Steve Locke Withdraws Proposal for Slave Auction Block Memorial in Boston

BY ANNIE ARMSTRONG July 17, 2019



Steve Locke. COURTESY THE ARTIST/AUDREY HSIA

Artist Steve Locke is withdrawing a plan to install a memorial slave auction block at the historic Faneuil Hall marketplace in Boston (<https://www.artnews.com/t/boston/>), citing the NAACP's opposition to the public-art project. The work was to have been located outside Faneuil Hall, where slave auctions were held in Boston before the state abolished slavery in 1783.

Locke said in a statement on Kickstarter where he has been fund-raising for the project, that the Boston branch of the NAACP informed him that they opposed the project, and that, given the group's opposition, the city's mayor, Martin J. Walsh, "will most likely not be able to continue his commitment to the project." Earlier this week, he received a call from the mayor's chief of policy informing him that the Boston NAACP was opposed to the project.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh told *ARTnews* in a written statement, “I thought Steve’s proposal was thoughtful and an important telling of a history that must have more visibility. I was hopeful that a public process would have allowed Steve to provide that context.”

ARTnews has reached out to NAACP’s Boston branch. This post will be updated when we hear back.

Locke had raised \$45,000 in crowd-sourced funding toward the \$150,000 he planned to raise for the sculpture, *Auction Block Memorial*, which had previously received support from the Boston mayor. The city had been set to match that \$150,000 through its Browne Fund for public art.

The Boston-based artist began work on the project earlier this year, as a resident with BostonAIR, the city’s public art residency program, and said that he wanted to draw attention to the role played by Faneuil Hall—and Hall proprietor Peter Faneuil—in the slave trade. “What’s not present at Faneuil Hall is any indication of where his money came from,” he told *ARTnews* in an interview on Tuesday. “There’s no conversation about enslavement, the trading of people, none of that is present . . . which is what my project proposed to do.”

In the email Locke received from NAACP Boston branch president, Tanisha M. Sullivan, she wrote, “I want to be clear that the work we do every day through the NAACP Boston Branch is centered on uplifting and advancing communities of color, with a focus on the Black community in the City of Boston.” She continued, “It is for that reason that we object

to the installation of a slave auction block memorial in front of Faneuil Hall and have made those objections known.”

Locke said that he wants to install the piece elsewhere on the East Coast at another site marked by the slave trade. He wrote on his Kickstarter that interest has come from people at sites in Salem, Massachusetts, New York City, and Providence, Rhode Island.

Locke said that he believes the NAACP’s opposition owes at least in part to one of its staffer’s being involved in New Democracy Coalition, a nonprofit that has opposed the memorial (<https://medium.com/@thenewdemocracycoalition/why-now-is-the-wrong-time-for-a-slave-auction-block-in-boston-77a4d3c0f905>) and called for Faneuil Hall to be renamed. However, Sullivan said in an email to Locke that the NAACP is not involved in that effort.

Prior to his withdrawal of the project, Locke had also received letters of support for Auction Block Memorial from the Freedom Trail Project, the National Park Service, and the Boston Landmarks Commission.

Locke has shown widely internationally, and had a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston back in 2013, curated by Helen Molesworth. His most recent public art piece placed three abstracted, monochrome images from the media coverage of Freddie Gray’s death while in police custody in Baltimore in 2015, acting as a public site for mourning his death. Titled *Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie (A Memorial for Freddie Gray)*, 2018, the piece was installed outside the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston from June 2018 through this past January.

“I’m an internationally known artist who has proposed an object for a city that comes right out of the city’s public art incubator program,” he told *ARTnews*. “The NAACP has no idea who I am. They just think this is the mayor’s project.”