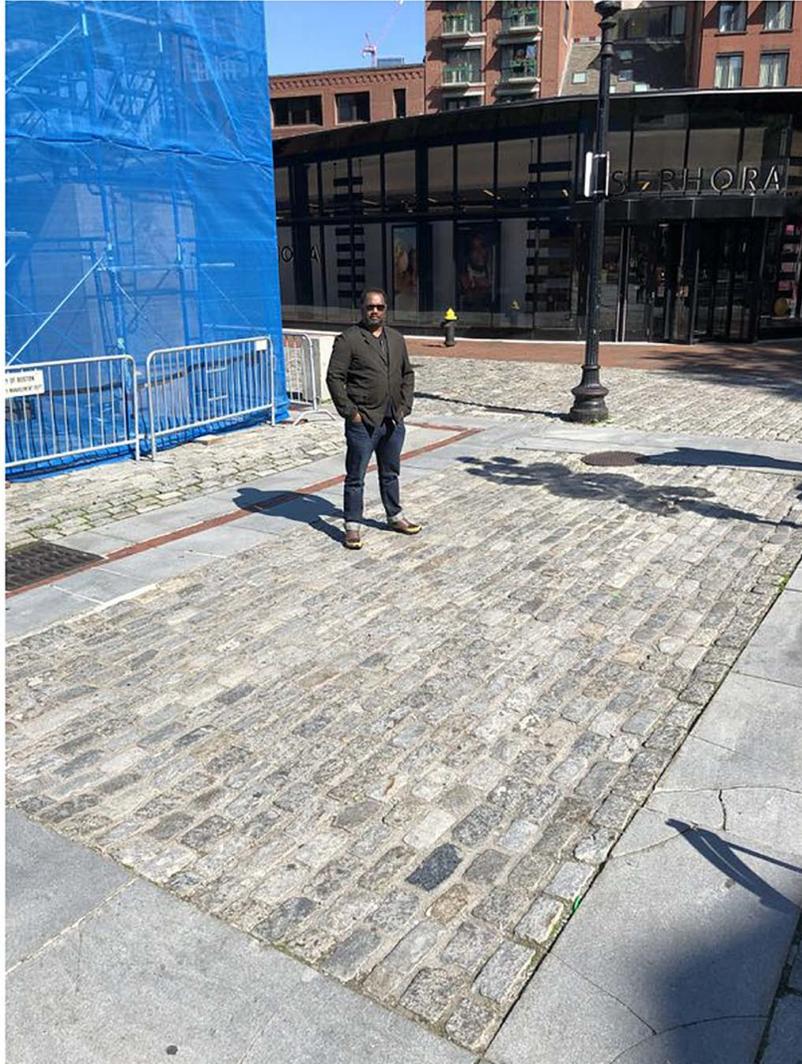


Boston lost a powerful, poetic work when artist pulled his 'Auction Block' slave memorial

By Murray Whyte Globe Staff, August 17, 2019



Earlier this year, Steve Locke stood outside Faneuil Hall at the site of his proposed memorial to enslaved people. ANTHONY PALOCCI JR.

On a recent sunny afternoon just outside the Great Hall at Faneuil Hall Marketplace, tourists sporting fanny packs and dollar-store Paul Revere hats clustered for group selfies while a grizzled illustrator sketched cartoony portraits of children for grinning parents. Nearby, a signboard in old-timey font pointed the way through the blue-tarp-draped doorway where the promise of “Revolution! Abolition! Suffrage!” awaited.

You could reasonably call the whole scene American History Lite — tales of yore thinned for easy consumption by the tourist set like cheap souvenirs and so many funnel cakes. That’s part of what made the steady counterweight proposed for this very spot by the artist Steve Locke both powerful and necessary indeed.

It was a plainspoken declaration of wrongdoing: He called it “Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall: A Site Dedicated to Those Enslaved Africans and African-Americans Whose Kidnapping and Sale Here Took Place and Whose Labor and Trafficking Through the Triangular Trade Financed the Building of Faneuil Hall.” Meant to replace an otherwise innocuous patch of granite cobblestones at the Great Hall’s doorstep, the memorial would have added gravity and meaning to the sunny carnival of selective history that plays out here, day-in, day-out.

But the work, if you haven’t heard, is not to be: In July, after more than a year’s work, [Locke withdrew his proposal](#) when the Boston chapter of the NAACP [publicly opposed](#) the project. (You can see a rendering of it, as I did, [on his Kickstarter page](#), where he raised more than \$48,000, or on his own website, [stevelocke.com](#)).

It’s not the only thing he withdrew: Amid the tangle of hurt and frustration that followed, Locke, a celebrated black artist with deep ties here, made clear that he’s leaving Boston for good. After more than 30 years making work in Boston, 14 of them as an associate professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, this is no small thing. He’s moving to New York this week, where he begins teaching at the Pratt Institute in September.

The memorial’s absence, and Locke’s, leaves us bereft: of a permanent public marker of the city’s foundational connections to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, so often glossed over in local lore slanted toward revolution and freedom; of a poignant, thoughtful, and understated work of art; and of an artist invested both in this place and in stories too frequently untold.

Locke often makes art grappling with toxic social issues around race and class, approaching his subjects with depth, subtlety, and a formal slyness. He speaks the language of the art world while gently subverting it for his own purpose. A recent piece, “Three Deliberate Grays for Freddie: A Memorial for Freddie Gray,” adorned the glass facade of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum through last year and into January.

A tri-color monochrome banner, the piece aped an iconic Brice Marden work, “Three Deliberate Grays for Jasper Johns,” one artist’s tribute to another. Here, Locke co-opted insidery art-world codes to honor a young black man who died while in police custody in Baltimore. He drew his palette not from the history of art, but from the grisly facts of Gray’s death. Each was taken from three photographs of Gray widely used in the media: A family photo, one taken during his arrest, and the last in the hospital while he was in a coma.

Locke’s memorial at Faneuil Hall, conceived while he was the city’s artist in residence last year, had kinship with his Gardner piece in its damning of narrowcast narratives, of art and history both. An outsize bronze plaque embedded in the ground, it would have satisfied the informational demands of Boston’s tourism ground zero: Emblazoned on its surface would have been a map of the trade routes between Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe by which African slaves arrived in New England to be bought and sold.

Implicated in this was Peter Faneuil, a city father and namesake of the market, whose vast fortune was made in part from the slave trade. It chafes Locke to have to explain that no, slaves weren't auctioned on that specific patch of ground, though many would have arrived in the nearby harbor in chains, and bought and sold nearby in the thriving marketplace. It's a fair complaint. The piece was meant to occupy metaphorical space —

an emblem for an inhuman practice widespread throughout New England, and a public gesture aimed at one of Boston's most public figures, at the location that honors him.

Here in liberal Massachusetts, which imagines itself a proud beacon of enlightenment in an American political landscape that seems to grow darker by the day, it would have provided a crucial amendment to a too simple tale.

Practically, Locke's piece introduced balance and a corrective: Glorious freedom and the city's vast wealth weren't shared by all; they were built at least partly on the backs of those who had neither. If the city's rough history of race relations ever since says anything, it's that things left unsaid fester and mutate and become more toxic from neglect.

Neither pedantic nor a screed, is it too much to think the memorial might have opened a wound for some of the rot to finally bleed out? That much we'll never know. What we do know is it would have given permanent public presence to an uncomfortable truth where it could have been most seen: amid the city's circus of made-for-tourism history, and at Faneuil's doorstep. (It's worth noting that this was hardly a guerilla intervention; as well as having had the city's support, Locke had been working with the Freedom Trail Foundation to add the memorial to its walking tour.)

But the piece was hardly meant to be just a practical marker. Like his work at the Gardner, its poetics ran deep in its form and the histories it both borrows from and refutes. The work was designed around the proportions of a slavery auction block as Locke imagined it based on the amount of space allotted for a "loose pack" cargo of slaves described in ship manifests of the day. Each person was apportioned a space 3-by-5 feet; at 10-by-12 feet, Locke's monument was designed to accommodate two families of four, with a small jut where the auctioneer would have stood to hawk his human wares.

It was to be bronze, the same material that immortalizes the "great men" of American history all over town. (Samuel Adams stands nobly at the opposite end of the Great Hall.)

It was to be heated to 98.6 degrees, body temperature, to invoke living human presence in this inhuman form. To the touch, it would have felt like flesh — like you.

From the practical to the visceral to the art-historical, Locke's subtle dismantling of dominant histories was a holistic affair. While working on the memorial, he made a series of abstract paintings, "Homage to the Auction Block," where he inserted an off-kilter rectangle into overlapping blocks of color.

The reference to Bauhaus forefather Josef Albers can't be missed: Albers's "Homage to the Square" paintings — he produced hundreds over more than 25 years, starting in the 1950s — are totems of Modernism, right angles and color locked in ruthless structure. Albers, like his peers, meant to reduce art — or purify, as they might have thought — to the rudiments of material and color, proportion and form. As a metaphor for Modernism more broadly — wipe the slate clean and start fresh — Albers's project was, in the post-World War II years, a bleak kind of optimism fueled by a compulsive urge to start over (the Bauhaus were chased from Nazi Germany as subversives, landing in the US as refugees).

You can't think about Modernism without thinking about modernity more generally, or at least you shouldn't. Modernism arrived at the far end of a world made over by colonialism, slavery, and industrialization as an impulse to simplify — to wash away the tangled chaos of an often-bloody past.

Locke's revision of Albers's defining work is deliberately ill-fitting — it doesn't snap into place in the tidy tale Modernism wanted to tell. To me, that's a big part of the point. His piece denies those exclusions, using its own language to build dark complexity into a sunny, oversimplified narrative. We can't ask more of a piece of public art. We're right to worry that Locke's exit from the process — and from the city itself — will chill those that follow to ask less.