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A painter challenges modernism with the harrowing history of slavery

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, July 29, 2020



Steve Locke's "Homage to the Auction Block #27-nightwatch." LAMONTAGNE GALLERY

Longtime Bostonian Steve Locke left the city for a job in New York last year after he withdrew his proposal for “Auction Block Memorial at Faneuil Hall.” The intended public art piece memorializes Africans kidnapped and sold by prominent 18th-century Boston slave trader and merchant Peter Faneuil. Locke put the brakes on after the Boston branch of the NAACP opposed the project.

“Homage to the Auction Block” celebrates and subverts Josef Albers’s legendary “Homage to the Square” series, a 25-year effort started in the 1950s and an emblem of Modernism’s zeal to distill art into material, form, and color. Albers, a color theorist, nested squares of different hues, demonstrating how they vibrate against each other.

Locke’s auction block form is a rectangle representing where the enslaved people would be held, with a jutting corner for the auctioneer. Like Albers, he surrounds it with concentric squares, playing with color juxtapositions, enjoying his paint. The paintings critique centuries of erasure of the people sold at Faneuil Hall and elsewhere. It implicitly includes all of colonialism’s tentacles, such as the seizure of land and the slaughter of Indigenous people.

It’s simplistic to draw a single, straight line from colonialism to modernism. But 20th-century modernists’ repudiation of history in favor of notions of purity echoed the presumptions of preceding centuries of colonialism.



Steve Locke's "Homage to the Auction Block #14" from 2020. LAMONTAGNE GALLERY

Locke puts those erased people, and indeed the dynamic of erasure, at the center of the picture plane and lets that history, and not the rigid and affectless square, be the dropped pebble from which colors ripple out. All kinds of harmonies arise: the Caribbean blues and sunny yellow in “Homage to the Auction Block #44–respice,” the bruised purples and blues in “Homage to the Auction Block #14,” the searing oranges in “Homage to the Auction Block #31–...and here my troubles remain.”

The formal clarity of modernist abstraction holds harrowing content well. The play of colors, like music, is a fluid entryway into the starkest of shadows. In this time of reckoning, it fits.